

THE ICE AGE

TAMAS ACZEL

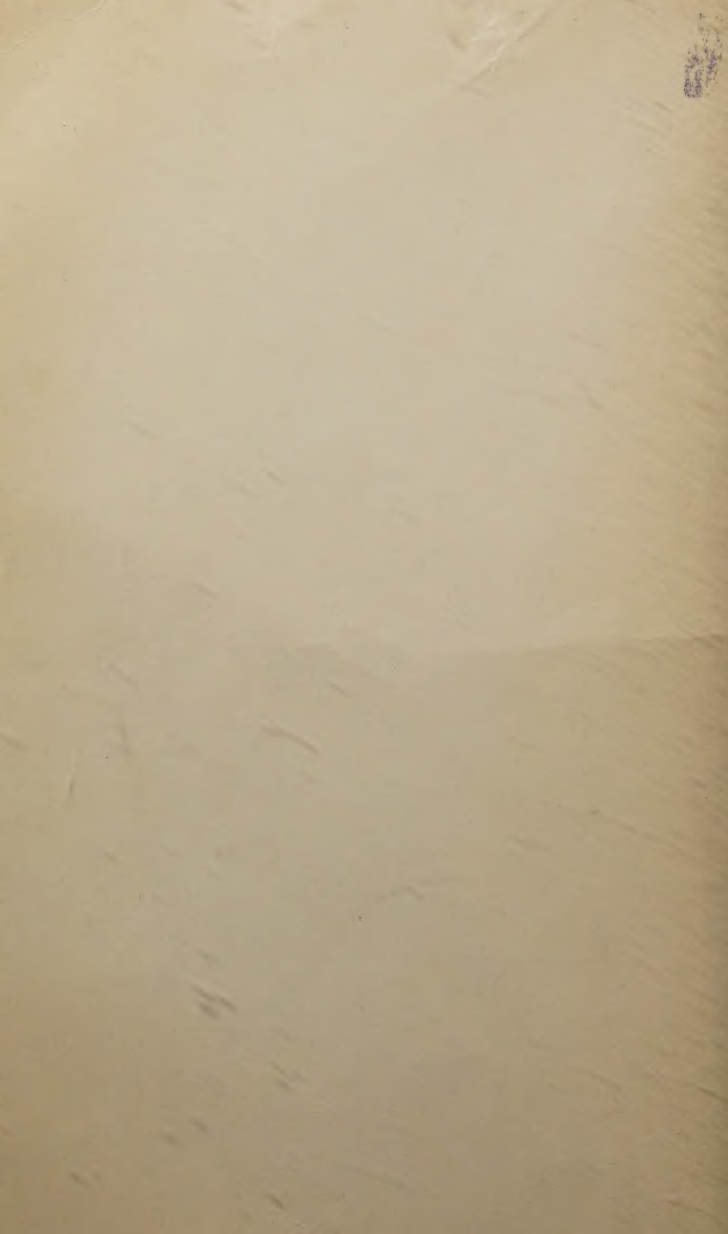


'A profoundly
disturbing novel'

N.Y. TIMES



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TAMAS ACZEL was born in Hungary in 1921. His brilliant novel reflects many of the terrors of his own experience.

Aczel himself became a prominent member of the Hungarian Communist Party. His book, *In The Shadow of Liberty*, made him a Stalin Prizewinner. His disillusionment with Stalinism was a gradual one. He was discharged from various important posts as a 'deviationist' and a 'rightist'. His close friendship with the executed Premier Imre Nagy set the seal on his 'undesirability'. He was forced to flee Hungary in 1956.

TAMAS ACZEL is uniquely qualified to write about the horror through which he himself lived.

The Ice Age

Tamas Aczel

A Mayflower Paperback

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CHAPTER ONE

Every morning on his way to work, Gortvai—a dark-haired young man living in Budapest in the early fifties of the twentieth century—walked down the Danube Promenade. At the Concert Hall he would accelerate his pace so as to arrive at his office in five precisely calculated minutes. Nor was he ever late, not once in three years; Gortvai was appreciated for his punctuality.

This morning, strange thoughts surprised him on his walk. From the moment he stepped out the doorway of the building where he had a nicely furnished, centrally heated two-room apartment, he felt that his morning walk would be more enjoyable than usual. The spring sun shone warmly. From the hills of Buda, the wind swept down the scent of drenched earth and bursting buds. At the corner of Old Post Street, after many days of icy rejection, there was at last an amiable smile from that blonde girl he passed every morning. Day after tomorrow I'll talk to her, the young man thought with pleasure; he believed in carefully planned operations. The intensity of an experience, Gortvai meditated, is in direct proportion to the meticulousness of the preparation for it. Only dilettantes think that speed means success. Gortvai was full of contempt for dilettantes.

At this point in his train of thought he suddenly stopped, as if he had bumped into an invisible wall. He looked up quickly. The scenery, which only a few moments before had been hidden in a blanket of early-morning mist, now came intensely alive, flashing its intimate loveliness. Everything glistened, sparkled, floated weightlessly in the rain-washed air. The burned-out ruins of the Royal Castle faced him; a little ahead, the clean-scrubbed stone breastworks of the Fisherman's Bastion and the gently curving swell of the green hills. He drew a deep breath of the sharp, cool air.

Gortvai was a country boy, from Puspokladany. He had grown up there among the poplars, the dust-laden acacias, odorous haystacks, boot-sucking muds, duckweed-covered puddles, and badlands glittering white with their blossoms of salt. Unlike city people, he did not sentimentalize the beauties

of nature; they simply filled him with a healthy voracity. That is what he felt now, taking in the landscape—an unquenchable thirst for the enjoyment of life, the immeasurable flood of the world's vitality—and, in the convex magic of light refraction above the river, for one brief moment he forgot the long gray day which confronted him.

You see, Gortvai, he said to himself, you are basically a fortunate and happy man, even if the idea of happiness and its actual realization do not always coincide. But that shouldn't bother you. You are a practical man. Your field, on which you based not only your university dissertation but your entire life, is a practical one: the development and improvement of fruit and vegetable canning. You have become a canning expert. True, in your younger years, this wasn't the glorious goal you set for yourself, but when you're twenty the simplicities of life seem more complex and the complexities simpler. You have a decent job, where to be sure, they're suspicious of you because your father was a bank director in those years which are now remembered with sternly knitted brows as a time of inhuman oppression but which for you still evoke childhood and warmth. Let them be suspicious. They know what they know, and you know what you know: there is no reason, no need, for trouble—provided, of course, you don't get into open conflict with that dried-up Party Secretary. But if you have been able to avert a clash until now, and with no great difficulty at that, why shouldn't you be able to preserve your equilibrium? You're a specialist in preserving, after all. Everything's in good shape. You can live on your salary. Women like you. Your father's house hasn't been nationalized yet. You have a nice apartment. If you're smart, you'll ignore that old janitor with the onion breath who comes and whispers in your ear that today—for the third time—strange men came to ask how you happened to have twelve silk broadcloth shirts and who tells *them* about the visits from loose women and high-living men friends. It's their job to ask around and yours to shrug it off. As a matter of fact, you have only one worry: you must be careful to avoid any unnecessary meetings with poor Rezi Karolinszky. You never had any relationship with Rezi. True, on a foggy December afternoon you felt sorry for her and took her to a movie, but no one can prove from this that there was any close relationship between you—not even Comrade Holcz, who ran into you at the theater. You have no cause for alarm. If you did, they surely wouldn't have rewarded you with that bonus a few weeks back. That was already several weeks ago?

Don't get nervous. Nothing has happened since then. Yes, you're lucky, Gortvai.

He gazed around him with satisfaction, almost with a sense of fulfillment. Only then did he remember to look at his wrist watch. Three minutes past eight-thirty—Jesus Christ!

As he ran he quickly went through several obvious excuses (slight temperature, a telegram from his father, faulty plumbing, an upset stomach) but found none of them very convincing. Meanwhile he had reached the building with the sign on its door saying that the offices of the Hungarian People's Fruit and Vegetable Canning Authority were to be found on the fourth floor. With sudden determination he decided that if they didn't ask, he wouldn't say anything. He felt rather proud of himself, and his self-esteem went up several more degrees.

Gortvai was lucky: he met no one in the corridor.

CHAPTER TWO

At the same hour, at the Moscow Square bus stop, a young woman got on the Number Five marked Pasaret Road. The bus was empty; the young woman sat down by the first window, her eyes closed, her face buried in a white handkerchief. When the bus turned down Malinovsky Boulevard with a sudden lurch, there burst in, like a bearer of glad tidings, an open windowful of the strong, fresh scent of lilacs. The young woman shuddered. Standing before her was the conductor. 'One through ticket,' she said in a whisper and dropped the coin she had been clutching into the conductor's palm without looking up; she dreaded having someone stare at her tearful face, the dark circles of fatigue around her sky-blue eyes, the slight redness at the tip of her delicate nose. 'One through,' the conductor repeated and glanced at the sunlight falling on her dark hair. Then he returned to the other end of the bus, where he sat down, putting the log sheet on his knees.

The young woman opened her eyes now and stared dazedly into the radiant face of the scenery but saw nothing. The bus, meanwhile, had left the Cogwheel Railway stop and the gas station which reddened the corner of Pasaret Road, where the yellow Skoda of a well-known and detested writer was parked; it swung past the coral clay tennis courts and stopped before

the Public Food Supply store. There she got off, so awkwardly that she almost fell.

The air was damp and cold, a bit stinging, as always in this narrow valley which collected the chilly dawn air receding from the hillsides. She leaned, trembling and almost helpless, against the low stone wall around a villa and desperately clutched the wire netting as if she were afraid that the light morning breeze from Swabian Hill might knock her off her feet. Sudden tears filled her blue eyes. Now that she was only a stone's throw from her brother's home on Wild Rose Street, a consuming exhaustion took hold of her. Help me this once, Lord, she thought with great effort, for numbness had taken possession even of her brain—oh, just this once . . .

Her exhaustion was caused not so much by physical fatigue as by a suddenly erupting fear which manifested both the intensity of her yearning and the dread of its fulfillment. 'Something wrong, little comrade?' Blue denim trousers stood before her, rolled-up shirt sleeves, close-cropped hair, a thick, tanned neck. On top of the bullneck an odd, flat head wagged funnily. 'Something wrong?' . . . 'Something is wrong with this child, Toni,' a gentle, calm woman's voice said very far away. 'Are you sick, Rezi, dear?' She wasn't sick. Toni led her to his office, in among the fearfully glittering surgical instruments, laid her on the white oilcloth-covered bed, took her temperature and shone an amazingly tiny flashlight into her eyes; then he shrugged, unsmiling, as was his custom. 'Go to my room,' said Toni coldly. 'There's nothing the matter with you' . . . 'There's nothing the matter with me,' said the young woman and looked at the bull-neck gratefully. 'You're really very kind . . .' She let go of the iron grating of the fence and moved away with slow, unsteady steps.

She hadn't slept for three nights, ever since they had arrested her brother Toni, chief physician and director of the Cold Valley Road Hospital. She had just lain there rigidly, listening to the nothingness, with Pupak, the blue-eyed Siamese (for a long time now her sole bed companion), at her feet. There, on the eighth floor of the large, square apartment building by the Danube, she lay thinking of the house: of the vine-covered walls, the tinted etchings along the staircase (showing Buda and Pest a century ago), the flaming-blue Persian rug in the great entrance hall, the dining-room table, Flora's bedroom—the three-way mirror on the dressing table, the cosmetic jars, the soft powder puffs, the heavy-scented little bottles, the chestnut tree swishing outside the window. 'If you'll slap that

goo on just once more for all it's worth, I'll buy you a big candy bar,' said Flora, Toni's wife, with conspiratorial glee. If I had slapped that goo on just once, the young woman thought, perhaps Flora wouldn't have had to die so soon. But she never did. The moment her small, bony hand reached for a box of powder or a jar of cream, the longing would instantly subside within her: she knew that Toni disliked her hanging around with her face smeared.

Rezi was born exactly twenty-one years after her brother. While her elderly parents were still alive, she was rather afraid of them—not so much of their age (for a long time she hadn't even noticed it) as of the wry, impassive acquiescence with which they acknowledged her existence. Her father, at her birth, was past fifty; her mother had just turned forty-two. Rezi actually owed her life (something she learned only after they were dead) to a functional disorder; her mother noticed her pregnancy only in its fourth month and by then it was too late. Perhaps that was why Rezi loved Toni with such unswerving adoration, asking nothing in return.

She had stayed in her apartment, disconnected the telephone, stopped eating and had not even paid attention to Pupak's whine. On the fourth day, she broke down; her helplessness was defeated by an even greater helplessness. Painfully she pulled herself together and stumbled dizzily downstairs and out into the street.

The house looked the same as it had every spring for twenty-two years. The neatly mown lawn sparkled with dew. The lilac bushes gave off their cheerful scent. The white garden bench was radiant in a fresh coat of paint. Except for the closed shutters and the locked French windows, there was no sign of the master's absence.

Rezi stopped at the garden gate. She would have to ring and wait till old Jozsef Ferenc or his wife, Eszter, shuffled out to open it. Have they been dragged away too? she thought, and staggered. The fear of having to face the empty house all alone pushed her away from the gate, all the way back to the middle of the road. There she turned around and began to run downhill, back to where she had come from. But her legs, in which contradictory impulses had maliciously settled, as in drainpipes, suddenly gave up; her knees buckled and, noiselessly, she dropped to the pavement.

CHAPTER THREE

Opposite Gortvai in the narrow stuffy room (two years ago, when the fourth floor of the apartment house had not yet been converted into offices, these must have been the maid's quarters) sat a short, muscular, very blond young man. As he bent over his ruled notebook his forehead would occasionally become lined too; at times he would scribble a few words, then look up a trifle forlorn and drum on his strong, fleshy nose with a yellow pencil. Then you could see his wide, bony, bright face, onto which, when he wrote, angry shadows were apt to fall; also his large yet well-shaped ears, his thick red lips, his hard chin contrasting sharply with the grayness of his eyes, and, above them, the arch of slender, nearly snow-white eyebrows. For a while Gortvai contemplated this familiar face, then tried to immerse himself in the papers before him. Basically he liked his work; it transported him, if only temporarily, into a familiar world of its own, indifferent yet not inimical, but now the cheerfulness of his morning walk had worn off, yielding to an unpleasant, stifled feeling which, though not unknown to Gortvai, was nevertheless disconcerting. The cramped room, whose one minuscule window gave on an air-shaft, shut out the vibrancy of the springtime city, the live exhalations of women's bodies. He would have liked to shout a loud farewell to the dusty indifference that clotted around him and rush out into the wide-open world.

Instead, he just sighed deeply. What will I say to Rezi when she comes for advice, as she surely will? My dear Rezi, it is my considered opinion that, at a time like this, what matters most is ... But maybe she won't come to work today either. Just now he had gone to the office of the director, where Rezi worked, but her desk was unoccupied. The other secretary, Aliz Weszelka, was pounding away at her typewriter with such absorption that Gortvai could sneak out unnoticed. He wouldn't have dared to ask questions in any case, for a rumor was going around that Aliz Weszelka had close connections with Mrs. Mikecz, the Party Secretary. Who knows, by now perhaps even Rezi has been ... In that world of which he, too, was a small but contributing cog, you never knew when nothing would turn into something, an insignificant remark into a mark against you, a mark into a memorandum, into a file, into an investigation, into ... None of my business. Comrade Mikecz can bear me out: I have always been the

People's Democracy's best . . . I ought to go see Rezi, though; she might be in trouble—but suppose they're watching her place? They're watching every place. There are no more places; there is only watching. . . .

'What are you doing?' he suddenly asked the young man opposite him, for the silence had become unendurable.

'I'm cramming,' said Alajos Sandor genially. 'Tomorrow our beloved Mrs. Mikecz will give us a quiz on Party loyalty. Non-card-carrying Bolsheviks like you have it easy. You grab your hat at five o'clock and off you go.'

'Like hell,' Gortvai said, 'like hell. It's going to be an open meeting. You think Mikecz didn't get me? This morning she said that, as a special honor, I could attend the——'

'Listen,' said Alajos Sandor, 'two years ago that would have been worth a thousand forints to you, right?'

'You're right,' Gortvai admitted, smiling; Sandor was always right. The invitation meant security and, more than that, Party confidence in him. Tomorrow, he thought, feeling rather relieved, I'll get that blonde.

The phone rang. 'Hello,' said Sandor. 'What's up, Aliz?' he listened for a while. 'Speak up, dear. I can't understand a word you're saying.' He covered the receiver with his palm. 'The poor dope is scared to talk. Somebody must have come into the room.'

Gortvai shook his head. 'I told you that skinny bitch——'

'Will you please leave it to me?' The gray eyes lit up. Gortvai shrugged; if a man insists on hanging himself . . . 'Has he left yet?' Sandor asked into the telephone. 'Well?' The shadow of a cloud fell on his sunny face. 'She didn't come in again today? The fourth day in a row . . . ' Gortvai bent over his papers. 'I'll be over right away,' Sandor said and hung up. 'Did you hear that?'

'I heard. She didn't come in, so she didn't come in. She must have things to do.'

'What do you know about it?'

'Nothing,' Gortvai answered loudly. 'I know nothing whatever about it, and I couldn't care less.'

'You couldn't?' Sandor asked meaningfully.

'No,' said Gortvai and burrowed even deeper into his papers. 'Why are you asking me? There are sixty-eight people working in this place. Why should I be the one to know?'

'I see,' said Sandor quietly. 'Why indeed?' And he walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Sandor headed for the Party office, but outside Mrs. Mikecz's door he changed his mind. What good is she? he thought with annoyance. She'll smile, sit me down, politely ask how my wife is, whether she's over her bronchitis yet, whether we've found a kindergarten for Dani, because if not, she would gladly . . . It wouldn't matter so much, Sandor thought as he entered the accounting office, whose small rear door led to the secretaries' room, if only she weren't always so businesslike, God damn her. If I could feel once, just once, that Anna's bronchitis or Dani's kindergarten really interested her, I would forgive her for . . . But he never had. From behind the mask of good intentions, perfect unconcern yawned at him, open-mouthed. At the thought of Mrs. Mikecz, Sandor felt a distasteful pity mingled with nausea.

In the middle of the accounting office he was stopped by an expectant look. Edit Simonovics seemed both frightened and hopeful. Sandor gave a wary shrug. The woman, a widow of forty and the mother of two children, turned pale. He knew the cause of her agitation. Last winter, at an office party, when the ten-o'clock mood induced by a few bottles of wine and phonograph records was considerably better than usual, Edit Simonovics had, within earshot of several colleagues, invited him and Rezi Karolinszky to her son's fifth-birthday party. That was when the friendship between these two lonely women had begun.

In her nervousness, the woman dropped her pen. Sandor went over to her and picked it up. 'Don't worry, Edit,' he whispered. In the room, where five people were working, there was absolute silence—cold, brittle silence. 'There's nothing wrong . . .' He realized that he was talking nonsense, but the silence (and he knew that the news of the arrest of Rezi's brother was the cause of it) so appalled him with its circumspection and cautiousness that he couldn't think of anything to say. They've clammed up, he thought, clammed up tight. And they're right, too. What should they say? What could they say? We have just flunked out, Comrade Mikecz, at this very moment. If anyone still has any doubts about that, let him listen: Back to your seats, zero; you can neither be promoted to the next class nor repeat this one; the faculty of the College of History, by unanimous decision, certifies you dismissed; only Comrade Mikecz is entitled to explain, expound, proclaim our society the supreme synthesis of all societies. He looked around the room; no one had stirred yet.

In the secretaries' room, he found Aliz Weszelka alone. On

Rezi's desk, a few letters lay unopened. 'Lautenburg?' he asked huskily, and started, without stopping for an answer, for the director's door.

'Oh, no!' the thin black piece of string exclaimed with alarm. 'The Comrade Director has left strict orders that no one...'

Sandor was infuriated by her petty whining. 'You know very well that I can——'

'Mrs. Mikecz is in there,' she rattled on breathlessly, avoiding his glance. 'I think it's about poor Rezi that they're...'

'Eavesdrop a little, my girl,' said Sandor softly. 'Take some water in to them, coffee, a box of matches, anything, but find out what they're talking about. And if possible,' he added wearily, 'make an exception this once, and don't tell Mrs. Mikecz that I asked you to.'

Then he hurried back to his cubicle.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Rezi came to, more than an hour later, the first thing she saw was two stiffly smiling, black-maned young man who looked as much alike as two comic blackbirds. Dressed in their Sunday best, with cockades in their buttonholes, hands properly clasped, chests thrown out in the heart-rending pride of timeless youth, sporting a bemused stare appropriate to the occasion, they hung on the wall in a silver-gray frame. By the light filtering through the slits of the shutters, Retz looked at the two blackbirds through half-opened lids. For a long time she watched, motionless; at the sight of the familiar picture, her sense of danger drained away. In the gloom which created a particular peace in the little room, she took stock leisurely of the objects around her.

Everything was in its place, conscientiously, cleanly, carefully, as it always had been these twenty-two years, every time she had dropped in to lap up the large cup of hot chocolate with raisin-studded, golden coffee cake. She lay on the same wide bed with the high headboard on which she had so often curled up as a child. To the left and right, the two night tables; on the opposite wall, facing the window, the double-doored, mirror-paneled wardrobe turning brown from age, exuding its

odor of freshly ironed linen. On the bureau, beneath the picture of the two youths, languished the Biedermeyer group of Meissen figurines (a young lady in a straw hat, a bouquet in her hand, tries to ward off with a not altogether rejecting gesture the young gentleman behind her, eager for a kiss; with her other hand she holds a sleek Russian wolfhound on a leash). And by the small, round table, napping in the dark-blue plush armchair, the tall, wiry old man whose mustache she had tugged at so many times in her childhood: Jozef Ferenc, retired chief stoker, now caretaker and gardener of her brother's home.

I'm alive, Rezi thought lazily, and looked at the pair of blackbirds again. The twins smiled encouragingly. Ever since a land mine had blown them sky-high at the edge of a snowy Russian steppe, they had no more secrets; they openly admitted that they knew nothing. Both of them had been in love with little Rezi, who, after some hesitation, had picked Karcsi. Jani had then somberly marched out into the garden; an hour and a half later he had returned and magnanimously given up his claim to Rezi. 'Do you love me still?' she asked softly. Karcsi nodded. 'You're lying,' Rezi said. 'You never loved me. Those who love don't die.' And she turned her head away toward the window and the peaceful snoring of Jozsef Ferenc. The lie didn't hurt any more. The current of her thought had started up again, and with the circular movement of returning memories, time resumed its interrupted flow. But, curiously, the chasm into which she had hurtled didn't shrink; it widened instead. The other side, the agonies of the past few days, the self-reproach, the terror, the doubts, the wear and tear of her bus ride, fluttered somewhere far off, at the bottom of the suddenly toppling horizon. Everything that had ever happened to her had happened in a previous existence whose laws were absolutely different from those of the present and immediate future. The anxiety that had lurked in her body like a remittent fever was suddenly replaced by a shivering emptiness, a clammy sense of deprivation. Rezi felt cold. Cautiously, lest she disturb the calmly slumbering old man, she threw off the soft white woolen blanket, slipped on her shoes and stole out into the garden and the beaming sun.

CHAPTER FIVE

Professor Antal Karolinszky-Thorok stood at the window of his office for some time without moving. His cigarette, perched on the edge of the ashtray, had become one long ash. He didn't touch it. The assistant Chief Physician, a pleasant-voiced, smooth-mannered man whose soft, childlike face showed just a hint of blondish beard, was leaning against the white filing cabinet and holding a small notebook in his hand. He finally reached forward and carefully put out the smoking butt. For a moment he was hopeful that this movement would rouse the professor, but nothing happened. Dr. Wass was embarrassed, as always when he was with Karolinszky, for there was no telling whether his superior was paying attention or not. He had been working with him for a year and a half, but still he could not be sure of the professor's moods or intentions. This failure filled him with fear and hatred, yet he still could not rid himself of the self-conscious awe that overcame him whenever he approached Karolinszky. He swallowed hard. The professor was still standing motionless at the window, examining the rain-soaked landscape from behind half-lowered lashes, as though diagnosing the causes of the quickly come and as quickly gone shower. Dr. Wass shrugged. After all, I don't expect to stay here the rest of my life. Let him pay attention or not; who cares?

'A new patient in Surgery,' he said, trying to speak with matter-of-fact dryness. 'Admitted at nine thirty-two A.M. Acute appendicitis. Operation prepared. Customary dosage of Novocain. Perforation occurred at nine fifty-six. Inoperable.' He glanced at his notes. 'Isolation ward. C-sixteen, the Party Secretary for Nograd County. Carcinomic phenomena on gastric wall with probable metastases in liver. Biopsy requested. C-seventeen, coronary thrombosis. Patient deceased three forty-two A.M.'

He looked up at the professor uneasily. C-seventeen had been an important man, a member of the Central Committee and head of the Organizational Department, an experienced, taciturn old Communist who had come home at the end of the war after twenty-five years of exile in Moscow. Good thing I wasn't on duty last night, he thought; I'd be in for it now. He did not dare tell his chief that three-quarters of an hour ago an officer of the State Security Organization had telephoned to inquire about the cause and circumstances of the death. Nice

mess, thought Dr. Wass; the fourth to go in a month. You'd think death would be outlawed by Party decree. At least they might double the guard at the entrance, so as to let death in only when it was in the interest of our glorious Party. Damn that bitch who had me transferred here from my nice quiet job in the sticks. He would never forget the morning when, after a horrible overnight milk-train ride, he had arrived at the polished eight-story block of stone which was the hospital. His skin had turned to gooseflesh. The empty meadows of Cold Valley were covered with hoarfrost, an icy wind whined down from Rose Hill and before the wide glass portal curtained ZIS limousines were pulling up in rapid succession, unloading fur-clad creatures....

'C-eighteen,' he continued, 'gastric ulcer, the ninth——'

'Make it brief,' said Karolinszky, 'and then take a cold shower.' He turned around at last. Astonished, Dr. Wass looked at his face, almost waxen in its fixedness and, despite its forbidding coldness or because of it, alarmingly beautiful. The jet-black hair graying at the temples; the high, furrowed forehead; the black eyes dazzling behind the thick black fringe of lashes; the straight fine nose and the pitilessly curling, pale lower lip: a rigid face with such strict unity that whoever looked at it felt disquiet touch him like a chill. 'Wait. Tell Zoltan I want to see him.' Dr. Zoltan was the Party Secretary for the hospital.

Clever, the assistant chief thought as he reached the door—very, very clever. Forestalling by surprise attack. But sooner or later ... His hand was on the doorknob. 'I'll send him right away,' he said softly.

'Wait,' said the professor without a shade of impatience. 'Tell them to bring me a box of matches, some extra-strong black coffee and a glass of ice water.'

The assistant chief seethed with rage, though by now he should have got used to these curt commands. Forward march, bring the strongest of all espressos—oh, that son-of-a-bitch, that conceited bastard, that goddam genius. 'Klari,' he said peremptorily to the secretary outside the professor's office, 'get the usual for the Comrade Chief.' He looked deep into the eyes of the red-headed girl, who curled her lips contemptuously. If you bite me, Dr. Wass thought cheerfully, at least I'll know that I still exist. But for how long? His taste for dalliance was suddenly gone.

After Wass had closed the door behind him, Professor Karo-

linszky lingered a little longer at the window from which he could clearly discern the reddish patches of the tennis courts on the western slope of Rose Hill, the houses hiding among plane trees and pines, and, among them, the russet tiles of his own villa appearing through the wind-swayed chestnut trees. Up here, on the fourth floor, the tinkle of trolley bells, tooting of horns, hum of motors were spun into a thin buzz. The rain had beaten down the dust, and in the sudden burst of sunshine the crystal-clear air over the hillside began to dance. It filled the room, gathered up the papers on the desk, set the white cabinet door in motion, crept into the telephone receiver and so rearranged the smoke-cured room in the twinkling of an eye that, when the professor turned around, his black eyebrows contracted in amazement. But he did not believe in magic.

His head ached. From the time he had awakened, the dull throbbing had been hiding in there between his temples and eyelids, and he knew that it would be a miserable day unless he could curb his headache in time. Nicotine poisoning, he thought. Last night, as he walked home from his new mistress along the deserted Pasaret Road, he could feel his system filling up dangerously with the poison. Out of spite, he lit a cigarette before going to sleep. It was not lack of will power; he could have given up smoking. What good would it do? he thought with disgust. I'd only be retarding the process. Try to chase death out of me—in a pig's eye. For a long time he tossed on his bed, cursing softly.

In order to live, he thought the next morning as he looked into the bathroom mirror to examine with absolute indifference the rings blackening under his eyes, in order to live we must die a little every day. He coughed dryly. His breastbone tingled, and there was a nasty little cramp gnawing away at the pit of his stomach. He sent back the tea which Eszter brought and had coffee instead. The stern-eyed, taciturn old crone, who had been in charge of the housekeeping since Flora's death, obeyed without demur; it was not for the likes of her that one took the trouble to invent explanations. The professor drank his coffee and took two sedatives. But the pain increased in the course of the morning. It spread to the cranial bone, attacked the medulla, and, as he stood by the window, Karolinszky felt as if his head had been clamped into an iron vise. But since pain was of no special interest to him, for he considered it the by-product of living (if not, indeed, its essence), his indifference was the result not only of unparalleled self-control but also of a contemptuous distaste for life. He took a phial of caffeine

from his desk drawer and carefully let the hideously bitter drops fall on his tongue.

Dr. Zoltan came in, his white coat immaculate, his face rumpled. 'You called me,' he said, and modestly stopped before the desk.

'Sit down,' said the professor. 'Your hand is trembling. No operating for you today. Call Bereznay and tell him to scrub in. What you do nights is none of my business, but if I ever see you again with your hands shaking, I'll have you kicked out.' He leaned back in his chair and waited for the young doctor to pass on the instruction over the phone.

'Bereznay is scrubbing in,' Zoltan said as he hung up.

The professor made no reply. The headache was abating, but in its place came violent hunger pangs. At first he tried to ignore them. I'm not hungry, he thought furiously; I've had enough for breakfast. He got up suddenly and stepped to the window again. He had decades of experience in channeling his thoughts and could concentrate on a single task or problem with such incredible will power that objects, concepts, ideas became stripped down in his mind to their final nakedness like ghostly skeletal mechanisms. Lacking any humility in the face of human suffering, he thought now of C-17: of the features he had seen yesterday morning for the last time. There was the conniving wink with which the patient, an experienced old fox, had conveyed that he knew him—his past, present and future, his mode of living and, perhaps, even of dying—and that, whether he liked it or not, he had him in his power. 'Am I going to die?' C-17 had asked with cold scorn. 'If there's any justice in the world, very soon,' Karolinszky had answered. 'Otherwise, you'll be back harassing the peasants in three days' time.' The patient roared with laughter. 'I like a class-conscious man,' he said. 'Like whatever you please,' said the professor. 'It's a free country.' 'Was it freer twenty years ago?' C-17 inquired. 'Class structure is your affair,' said the professor. The face looked at him now through the window with an expression of relief, as if unexpected death had absolved it of irksome responsibilities.

'Have you heard?' the professor asked.

'Yes,' said Zoltan.

'Are you afraid?'

'Of what?' The Party Secretary gave us a start.

'You should know better than I,' the professor replied. 'Of your comrades.'

'Not of them.'

'Too bad,' said the professor. 'You'd have fewer surprises in life.' He knew not only that the Secret Police had made inquiries by telephone in the early morning as to the cause and particulars of the death but also that, by order of the Central Committee, an investigation was to begin immediately. It would inquire not merely into the cause of the sudden death but also into all affairs of the hospital (particularly the more recent ones) from top to bottom, from the out-patients division to the isolation ward. I'll have the charwomen lined up single file, the professor thought. They'll give some fascinating reports.

'Why did you go down to the morgue?' he suddenly asked Zoltan.

By now everyone in the hospital knew that C-17 had died unexpectedly. The news had been blabbed out by one of the night nurses on the isolation ward to her girl friend who worked in Admissions. It happened at the Moscow Square terminal of the Number Twelve bus as the nurse, who was returning home, met the secretary, who was going to work. This scatterbrained little brunette passed it on, right there on the bus, to the head nurse in Emergency, and though she had bound her to the strictest secrecy, exactly ten minutes later Dr. Feldheimer, the hospital stomatologist and lover of the head nurse, knew all about it. Half an hour later, Mari, the fat switchboard operator who walked like a dragoon, listened in on a conversation between Dr. Wass and an officer of the State Security Organization who gave his name as Major Ferenc Kovacs. The gist of this conversation was passed on by Mari to the lame young radiologist. The hospital, where death was not considered an unusual occurrence, awaited developments with mute attention and assumed indifference.

The patients, of course, knew nothing of all this. Bodies covered with the sweat of nocturnal fevers were rubbed down with vinegary water. Urinals were emptied. Pillows were fluffed. The doctors set out on their daily rounds. Elevators continued to glide noiselessly. The smell of fresh coffee came streaming from the little buffet near the entrance hall. But there were signs, apparent only to the initiate, that behind the smoothly oiled routine some tempers had taunted. The water for the rubdowns was colder than usual. Some urine bottles under the beds were overlooked. The rhythm of the doctors' rounds was accelerated. You had to wait a long time for the elevators.

C-17 was not removed to the morgue. He remained in his bed in all his sickening rigidity, the alarm of final defeat stamped on his face, alone. And this was the worst sign of all.

Zoltan lit another cigarette. He was pale and extremely tired. Three days ago his younger brother, herdsman on a cooperative farm at Lake Balaton, had wired him to rush home to their sick father's bedside; since then he had had practically no sleep. It took two days to get the old man, stricken with pneumonia, admitted to the Veszprem Hospital, and on the third he had had to nurse his mother, who had collapsed from anxiety. On the way back at night, his car had broken down. After an hour and a half of tinkering, he gave up and got into the car to wait for daybreak. It was eight o'clock before he could get a tow. At the hospital, Dr. Wass had greeted him with the news of C-17's death. The first thing he did was to go down to the morgue to look at the cadaver, but it wasn't there. Why did I go down? Suddenly he understood what Karolinszky's question meant. 'I thought that...'

'You thought he'd be down there?' the professor asked in a flat voice.

'Yes,' said Zoltan. Sleeplessness overcame him. His eyes closed. 'Haven't your comrades notified you yet?'

'Not yet,' said the young doctor. His brother stood beside the lean cows. 'There's no fodder for them,' he said dryly. 'Have your comrades studied this problem?' 'Feri,' Zoltan had answered, 'aren't you ashamed of yourself? ...' In the co-op store, two dark-brown percale dresses hung gloomily beside a pair of rubber boots and a kerosene stove. 'Uncle Hajdu,' said the doctor softly, 'I would like to talk to Pista.' Pista Hajdu's father lowered his head dejectedly. 'They took him away,' he said at last. Zoltan had remained silent for a long time. 'Why?' he finally asked. Pista Hajdu had been his closest boyhood friend. Their nickname for him was dogface. Suddenly, through the open door, a hot blast from the lake came hooting in. 'He recited something,' the old man said. 'What did he recite?' Zoltan asked. 'Some patriotic verses by Petöfi,' Feri interjected. 'Very criminal.' 'Come,' Zoltan had said to his brother, 'let's go to the winepress.' Half their childhood had been spent outside that little hut, in the shifting sands under the big walnut tree. A great yearning for the odor of its leaves took hold of him. 'There is no more winepress,' Feri said. 'The vineyard was annexed by the cooperative.' 'Why didn't you

write me about it?' the young doctor asked, flushing. 'I thought you knew,' Feri said and shrugged. 'You guys up there seem to know everything. A big Communist like you...' A warm, honey-scented breeze swept over the land. Poppies had burst open blaringly in the fields. Stalks of corn protruded from the sea of weeds. 'This used to be ours,' Zoltan said under his breath. 'Yes,' said Feri. 'Nice of you to remember.' The doctor turned away. There was an old wild pear tree at the edge of the path. He could feel the tart taste of the fruit on the tip of his tongue. Far off somewhere a tractor was chugging away, gasping. Suddenly it stopped. It grew still around them: cheerfully, hummingly, sunningly still. From among the low hills, the calm lake glittered at them. 'What's going on here?' Zoltan asked. 'Nothing,' Feri said. 'What should there be, in a village?' He shot his brother a hostile look from narrowly slitted eyes. 'You're lying to me,' the doctor said, and was horrified by the anger that suddenly choked him. 'No,' Feri said simply, 'I'm not lying. Neither was Pista Hajdu. But this too will pass.' 'What will pass?' Zoltan had snapped. 'Let's go to lunch,' Feri said. 'It's noon.' In the village, the bell was ringing. They climbed up on the wagon.

The telephone rang on the professor's desk. 'Yes,' he said, 'he's here.' He held out the receiver. 'Speaking,' said Zoltan. 'Sit tight, Comrade. I'll be with you in a minute.'

From behind his growing hunger, the professor carefully scrutinized the young doctor's rumpled face and perspiring brow. Too bad; he's an intelligent fellow. The sympathetic radiation between them that had begun the instant they met still existed, but Professor Karolinszky, who was opposed to basing relationships on emotions, meticulously kept the young man from suspecting that he shared any feeling of attraction. It's quite enough that there should be the biological similarity, he thought, the identity of functions, the ballast of inertia which unites us anyway. Immutably alike and immutably different, that's what we are. It's hopeless. Too bad about him? It's not too bad about anyone. Everything is in its place in this world, except that somehow nothing has a place. Categories rattle around in our brain, but the universe is empty. There are no laws. God is the emptiness of lawless eternity. I'm horribly hungry.

Zoltan took out his fountain pen and scribbled a few words in the margin of a newspaper lying on the table. He then carefully tore off the bit of paper and put it in his upper-left

coat pocket. He had long, nervous, tapering fingers, which often set the professor wondering. Peasant stock in the body of a count. The doctor, as if guessing the professor's thoughts, blushed angrily under his suntan and promptly hid his hands behind his back; his almond-shaped eyes blinked, and the fine, thin wings of his nose tightened. He got up.

'Excuse me,' he said hoarsely, 'I have to go ...'

'By all means,' said the professor. 'Don't let me keep you.' He went back to the window.

The young doctor's wrath evaporated in a second. The fatigue which had been lurking in his bones suddenly yielded to an onslaught of bristling fear. He was to meet an officer of the State Security Organization, who was waiting two floors above in Zoltan's office. It was not the same lieutenant who had been popping in for months, at irregular intervals, with nerve-racking regularity. Dutifully, almost apologetically, the lieutenant would offer him a cigarette and proceed to question him about everything from A to Z: 'Comrade Zoltan, you will understand,' he would say, always in the same disagreeable, lecturing tone, 'our Party and State Security must be kept informed of all that goes on in this country—is that clear?' The doctor made no reply. 'In the class struggle,' the lieutenant would go on, 'there is no such thing as a vacuum. Where we are not, the enemy is—is that clear?' 'Comrade,' Zoltan would say, forcing himself to remain calm, 'I wouldn't know who Dr. Feldheimer is sleeping with, even if I were to ...' 'Naturally,' the lieutenant would say, 'it's out of the question. It isn't as if the Party wanted you, Comrade Zoltan, to snoop into your co-workers' ...' He talked as if Zoltan were a child, in cheerfully simple, well-rounded sentences, with a smile of absolute self-assurance on his thin lips: '... though, of course, the private lives of your colleagues do concern us, for in the Socialist society, as Comrade Stalin teaches us, even the smallest detail is ...' No, Zoltan thought, no, that can't be. The Party doesn't want me to spy on my colleagues; the Party wants me to ... He looked at the plainclothes A.V.H. officer. At least five years his junior, clean-shaven face, broad, prominent cheekbones, professional smile, brightly shining blue eyes. If only the comrades at the Central Committee knew that they were represented by this ... 'But then, Comrade Zoltan, you know all this much better than I do,' the lieutenant said unctuously, 'after a year at the Party School ... I, on the other hand, am just a poor, uneducated working man.' Zoltan's stomach

would start turning. Behind the modesty was an undeniable superiority: overbearing, loathsome scorn. What a bloated ass! 'But I'll be perfectly frank with you.' The officer raised his voice. 'At the Party School it had already become apparent that where class warfare was concerned, you, Comrade Zoltan, did not...' Now we're getting somewhere, the doctor thought. His throat contracted and the roof of his mouth felt dry. 'You'll become a true Communist,' the principal of the Party School had told him, 'only when you learn to hate.' 'It's love I want to learn,' said the young doctor. 'That's why I became a Communist.' He could never get rid of the bitter taste that lingered after that exchange. Though he tried to hide it from himself, the revulsion which the loudmouthed hypocrites inspired in him expanded over the years and, instead of finding an outlet, seeped into his body.

The lieutenant would go on smiling, although it was obviously hard for him not to be thinking. I knew it, I knew it. He won't answer. Has secrets. Disagrees. The little snot. The Party trusts him, puts him into this important place, and then... 'It's really too bad,' he said then, 'that you insist on being so uncooperative, Comrade Zoltan...' 'Nothing of the kind,' the doctor interjected. 'I just don't see any point in my...' 'The Party,' said the lieutenant in a loud voice, 'the Party has put you here, Comrade, so that you...' Zoltan looked up and his gaze fell on the wall facing him. The three pictures, carefully dusted, hung in their customary places. Lenin watching intently. Stalin smoking his pipe, good-natured and peaceable. And Rakosi, short, bald-headed, a wise brave, sensible fellow (the young doctor's heart filled with warmth) standing in the middle of a wheat field and examining the rich ripe ears with the affectionate understanding of one who knows that in life everything is a matter of affection and understanding. 'The Holy Trinity,' Feldheimer, the old Trotskyite, had once remarked to him. 'The working class,' said the lieutenant, 'is not separated, needless to say, by the Great Wall of China from the rest of...' How did Feldheimer dare say a thing like that? 'As we see it,' the officer went on with the same inflection, 'you must put up a better fight, Comrade Zoltan, against the bourgeois influences that...' He knew I wouldn't report him, the doctor thought, he must have been quite certain I wouldn't. But if I had...

The chill that ran down Zoltan's spine now seemed to come from an alien world. It was like the touch of a cold wire

connecting him to an unknown circuit whose frequency was of a higher intensity, livelier, than any previous experience. In this moment of shock, the Party Secretary discovered with a shudder the existence of a distant, threatening world which he had long believed—or made himself believe—nonexistent. He felt a heavy, sickening disgust with himself, a deliberate yet sincere contempt for his shabby, cowardly backtracking. An irresistible urge to pour out his heart overcame him. To talk—that was what he wanted—to talk and talk and talk. He knew that upstairs in the Party office he would be questioned against his will about every little thing, whereas here, facing the professor's idol-like immobility, no one asked him anything even though his whole body yearned for release from this bored, indifferent silence.

Karolinszky was indifferent not only to the case of Zoltan's agitation but to its very symptoms: the Party Secretary intruded on his train of thought. His headache had gone away, but his hunger grew irresistibly. Roast goose with parsleyed new potatoes—or baked chicken with cucumber salad? Saliva suddenly inundated his mouth. 'What are you waiting for?' he asked gruffly. 'Your comrades will only resent it.'

'Yes,' said the young doctor thankfully, 'I'm going.' But he did not budge. 'Perhaps you haven't been struck yet, Comrade Zoltan, by Karolinszky's stubborn silence?' the deputy head of the Cadres Department of the Central Committee had asked. He was a swarthy little man who had lost one leg, so the story went, in the Spanish Civil War. 'I've been struck by it,' said Zoltan, shrugging. 'That's how Karolinszky is. He doesn't go in much for conversation.' 'Out of the question,' said the fellow with animation, 'a simple error. Our young comrades are prone to fall into errors of this sort. Silence, too, is a way of taking sides—that's something we've got to realize. Or are you trying to tell me that Karolinszky is...' 'No,' said Zoltan in a low voice, 'he is not of our belief.' 'Quite so, my dear fellow,' pronounced the one-legged one, who was partial to such upper-class turns of phrase, 'quite so.' He bowed lightly, like a ringmaster. 'Our next attraction is Dr. Antal Karolinszky-Thorok, the ex-treasurer of the Grand Masonic Lodge of Hungary, in the guise of the enemy ...'

Zoltan blushed again. 'I was able to get my father admitted to the Veszprem Hospital,' he said, very loud. The professor opened his eyes in amazement. Still here? What does the boy want?

'Fortunate,' he said after a while.

'Double pneumonia, the pleura ...'

'Yes,' said Karolinszky. The new potatoes should be slightly browned in sizzling fat. Add a pinch of salt. Or perhaps boiled chicken with lots of carrots and noodles?

'Our winepress,' said the young doctor rapidly, 'having been nationalized ...'

'Fascinating,' said the professor and closed his eyes again. 'Who would have thought it?'

'At the instigation of the State Security Organization, my friend Pista Hajdu ...'

'My sympathies,' said the professor. 'It's not easy being friends nowadays.' Boiled beef with horse-radish sauce? 'Anything else I can do for you?'

The professor was left alone with his empty, cold hunger, which he no longer even tried to dispel. His entire imagination was obsessed by food: steaming soup bowls, richly laden meat platters, daintily labeled wine flasks, carefully decorated salads, foaming glasses of beer—all the more humiliating for being so desirable, all the more desirable for being revolting. He was seething with shame, anger and desire. But however much he raged, the hunger was sweeping away his fastidious but weakening resistance. He snorted loudly.

In the corridor, everyone stepped aside for him: the patients because they knew him only slightly, the doctors because they knew him all too well. The professor strode through the silence created by his presence as through his natural medium. Women turned to look at him, which he noted without a flicker of response. He was used to the fact that no woman could resist the silent mastery streaming from his being; but behind the gaze of surrender he could always detect the possessiveness to come. His answer to that was variety. Since he simply did not experience those softening moments in which one might make promises never to be fulfilled, his only promise was not to promise anything, and this he always kept.

His walk down the swarming, spotless corridor with its pleasantly mingled smells of ether and oil paint did not attract particular attention. But a year and a half ago a thunderbolt of surprise had struck all seven floors of the hospital simultaneously when Dr. Antal Karolinszky-Thorok, retired university professor, owner-director of the former Sukosd Sanatorium, well-known Freemason and son-in-law of the late Baron Izor Lehrer, the textile magnate, had been overnight

appointed chief physician and medical director of the Cold Valley Road State Hospital. It had been the talk of the hospital corridors, operating rooms and doctors' offices all over the city for weeks on end. Nobody knew for sure, but everyone guessed that this unusual decision must have been preceded by lengthy discussions in the Political Committee—or, to be exact, by recognition of the shocking conditions prevailing at the Cold Valley Road Hospital. These conditions had forced the party leadership to appoint Karolinszky head of that institution despite the fact that, both by background and open statements, he was clearly a hostile element.

Since the Politbureau always rigorously observed the formalities, it had directed the Minister of Health, who was also a member of the Central Committee, to offer the post of chief physician and director to Karolinszky in the approved fashion. The Minister of Health therefore telephoned the professor, who for the past year had scarcely set foot outside his villa, and asked him to be kind enough to come to see him, at once if possible; if he had no car at his disposal, the Minister would gladly send his own. The professor's first impulse was to turn down the invitation unequivocally and hang up. But from the Minister's polite communication, which carefully stressed 'the desire of our Party and State to raise our people's general health standards,' it was not hard to infer the inevitable. Half an hour later the Minister's car pulled up before the villa. In the car, besides the driver, there was a clean-shaven, beady-eyed young man whose profuse inquiries about the professor's health and work went unanswered. On arrival, the Minister received Karolinszky immediately. There was a brief silence. The professor was silent because he had nothing to say; the Minister, no doubt, because he didn't know what to say. The professor betrayed not the slightest sign of interest. The Minister, a short, bewhiskered man who himself had once been a doctor, must have felt constraint in the presence of a celebrated colleague. Just then coffee was served, and the interlude helped him out of a difficult confrontation. After a few lame introductory remarks, he came to the point. The Political Committee's resolution was not mentioned and, according to long-established Party practice, he proceeded as though he were offering the job to the professor for his acceptance or refusal. The professor drank his coffee but would have no second cup. The Minister reiterated—in a somewhat lower voice and with less *brío*—what he referred to only as 'my proposal.' The professor inquired whether the Minister's proposal

had been previously approved by some higher authority. The Minister, with a touch of indignation in his voice, explained that this appointment was solely and exclusively his responsibility and that he would brook no interference in such matters. The professor knew that the Minister was lying. The Minister knew that the professor knew he was lying. The professor sat in his customary pose, his eyes shut. Then he got up and expressed his thanks for the honor, which he therewith accepted. The Minister was visibly surprised. They shook hands. The professor went home. A week later the professor received his official appointment and on the following morning at eight o'clock he had appeared at the hospital.

The decision to appoint Karolinszky had not been made without certain safeguards. Dr. Zoltan, having passed a rigorous and comprehensive examination by the Cadres Department of the Central Committee, was assigned to the hospital shortly after the professor's appointment. At the end of his first week, Zoltan was elected Secretary of the hospital Party group by unanimous vote. The Political Committee expected that, with the help of the State Security Organization, and by keeping the young Party Secretary continuously and effectively in hand, it would have complete, uninterrupted information about the affairs of the hospital.

Karolinszky got out of the elevator on the eighth floor and blinked a little in the dazzling stream of light that flooded the corridor. After the elevator operator had asked twice whether he should wait and had received no answer, the doors closed silently behind the professor. He stopped in the bright, spacious hall whose translucent glass doors gave on corridors leading in three directions and looked around rather listlessly. In a small recess opposite him, behind a white-painted counter, the ward nurse rose respectfully. The professor nodded. In front of the nurse's cubicle three young men sat talking in comfortable leather armchairs. When the professor appeared, they suddenly stopped. He looked through them with impassive scorn; then his glance hovered briefly on the aquarium that glistened in the corner, where two guppies were scurrying in wiggly panic to the artificial tranquillity of the artificial sea bottom. He headed for the corridor to the left, which meant he had to pass directly in front of the young men. But he still did not look at them; he knew what kind of visitor they were, moseying around the ward day and night until a new bunch took over; occasionally they would peer through the glass doors or

stare vapidly after the train of doctors making their rounds and study the ankles of the younger nurses as they flitted by.

'Where's he off to?' one of the young men asked after the professor vanished behind the door.

'Can't you guess?' said the other patronizingly. 'Keep you eye on him now. We don't want any tricks from that damned...'

The first young man caught a glimpse of Karolinszky going into C-17. 'You're right,' he said appreciatively.

'You see,' the other one said. 'I know these old reactionaries; I've worked a couple of them over...' He looked around proudly, expecting recognition. The ward nurse buried her nose in her book.

The dead man in C-17 was covered by a sheet. Karolinszky stopped at the foot of the bed. Everything in the room was in its place, exactly as yesterday. On the night table, on top of a book, lay C-17's horn-rimmed glasses; beside them, a half-emptied glass of water beginning to break into bubbles; on the bedstead, the headphones—in the commotion, no one had thought of switching them off—were softly droning their mid-morning Grieg; under the bed, the slippers; on the table, in a marmalade jar, a bunch of lilacs. Through the open window came a cool, moist smell of earth from the hill behind the hospital.

The professor moved to the head of the bed and quickly lifted the sheet. His interest was not in the death but in the dead man, in the furrowed face lined with intelligent cynicism, which the morning before had looked him straight in the eye in a way that had caused the professor to sense accurately what the mind behind that face did not yet suspect. The lineaments, even if they had lost something of their uniqueness in the death spasm, were not really changed; rather, they only revealed more openly the true nature of the living man. His face was wiser, more suffering and mocking in death. The curious thing, thought the professor, is that this telltale face is all the more appealing. How he must have enjoyed his food! It annoyed him that when he had examined the patient and his nicely developed arteriosclerosis—a classic case—he had not sufficiently taken into account the possibility of a heart attack. True, perhaps he could not have averted it, but he might have at least, with appropriate measures, lessened its likelihood.

He shrugged and covered the corpse. He had no pangs of conscience, no feeling of involvement or compassion. He had a thoroughgoing contempt for those sentimental creatures who

spend hours hanging around a deathbed, a grave, an object being turned into a symbol, and carrying on long anguished conversations—one-sided, to be sure—with the dead or with their images. This, to him, was childish nonsense. He did not condemn those who spoke of God or the Beyond, but he never forgave them either. He did not even loudly proclaim his disbelief. The truth, which the professor had recognized at an early age, was that he denied the very thing that, as a doctor, he was ready to do battle for at a moment's notice: life itself. That is why he was not afraid of death, and why, perhaps, he was the lodestar of all who passionately loved life: small children, beautiful women, young men of action. But they could never get close to him, however much they wanted to, for at the last moment they sensed uneasily the professor's stubborn hostility toward whatever clashed with his own concepts of man and the world. The professor thought his behaviour natural, and as he did not believe in the possibility of sympathetic human contact, he could see no point in reaching for it. He lived among ice floes which he could not and did not want to thaw. His calm stemmed from the knowledge that the laws of nature would sooner or later relieve him of his detested duties, his courage from the awareness that not even God (if He existed) could change everything that needed changing.

He headed for the door but stopped, looking around a trifle surprised. The curiosity which had brought him to this room had not abated—it seemed, on the contrary, to be growing—but the disquieting thing was that he did not really know what he was curious about. He stiffened. His limbs became heavy and dismal; numbing fatigue swept over him. He grew dizzy. Leaning against the door, he drew on every bit of his remaining strength, for he felt that with the toppling of his physical balance might come the upsetting of a more delicately poised equilibrium. His will power did not let him down even now; with a single, furious tug, he halted his nausea. Instead of a scream, his mouth let out no more than an ill-tasting, low retch, a reminder of the deadly hunger that tore at his guts. His forehead was drenched with perspiration. Now that his sinews and nerves had stopped dissolving, he could sit down on a chair. For a while he remained motionless, staring into space, almost gaping. His gaze fell on the body stiffening under the sheet, the features so whetted by death that they almost pierced through the linen. Stunned, the professor discovered compassion within himself. All of a sudden, the unknown dead man became known to him: in yesterday's conspiratorial wink

he suddenly recognized the mysterious, never-to-be-expressed similarity which had vibrated between him and C-17. The dead man was the same as he, was perhaps himself: an ice floe adrift in the sea of loneliness, a hobbling Theseus in the labyrinth of the times, from whose hand—just as from his own—the thread of life had long since fallen. My regards to the comrades over there, he grunted and got up. Pickled pigs' feet sprinkled with lemon juice: the idea flashed through his mind with torturing vividness.

CHAPTER FIVE

The morning wore on. Alajos Sandor returned from the secretaries' room, sat down silently at his desk and continued preparing for the meeting. Gortvai asked no questions. He'll talk if he wants to, Gortvai said to himself, although actually he was eager to know what his office mate had found out. His interest was not so much curiosity as a means of defense against the surprise attacks of life and a preparation for the inevitable. Gortvai heaved a deep sigh and dutifully got down to work.

A short while later he became aware of a peculiar, quietly monotonous buzz which sometimes grew louder, sometimes softer. He looked up. He could see nothing, but he kept hearing the buzz, which suddenly took physical shape just above Alajos Sandor's pale blond hair. A bee, he thought gaily, and watched the tiny fluttering wings; how did a bee get into Gusev Street? And he continued to study its flight with growing pleasure and a curious benevolence. The insect now headed straight for the window and the freedom out under the spring sky. I ought to open the window, Gortvai thought, oppressed. Why don't I open the window? The bee buzzed on unremittingly. I wouldn't dream of opening the window, Gortvai thought angrily and bent over the documents on his desk. But he could not concentrate.

'My grandfather had an apiary,' he said after a while. 'Do you like honey, Alajos?' Until then it had never occurred to him to ask his friend whether he liked honey. And why should he have asked him? Everybody likes honey. No, there are those who don't like it. There comes a time for every question.

I think I should open the window. But still he did not move.

'I once went into my granddad's apiary, although my mother had told me not to,' he said and stared into the empty space before him. 'Say, Alajos, why *did* my mother forbid me to go to the apiary?'

Alajos Sandor looked up. 'That's what I'll say,' he announced grandly. 'Listen to this: "Honored Comrades! Today, when the triumphant effort to build socialism demands that every one of us should ..."'

'I slunk out of the house barefoot, at dawn, so Mother wouldn't notice. I was curious about the bees, Alajos; no one can make an issue of it if I was curious about the bees ...'

'"... for the dictatorship of the proletariat means, Comrades"—are you listening, Gortvai?—"yes, Comrades, the dictatorship of the proletariat means that, with unrelenting watchfulness ..."'

'You couldn't imagine, Alajos, how soft and cool the early-morning dust can be ...'

'"... I am a working man myself; my father was engineer on the Trieste express for thirty years ..."'

'You could see the apiary a long way off; it was surrounded by acacia because my granddad claimed that that's what gives taste to the honey ...'

'"... we longed for the joyful moment when we would see the first Soviet soldier at the cellar doors ..."'

'... all by myself under the blue sky—think of it, Alajos! I was only five years old ...'

'"... there is no more exploitation and oppression ..."'

'... a horrible black cloud of smoke was curling up from the acacia grove ...'

'"... now that our aims are becoming realities ..."'

'... my grandfather was already there, his face blackened by smoke ...'

'"... for Comrade Lenin is right when he says: Soviet might plus electrification equals Communism ..."'

'... nothing but smoldering containers and smoking hives ...'

'"... Long live the Party! Long live the ..."'

'... that was the first disappointment, the first ...'

'... everybody rises, there are prolonged cheers in the hall ...'

'... oh, shut up ...'

'... the applause turns into a celebration, Comrade Stalin turns into a god ...'

Gortvai looked on dismayed as his friend merrily picked up the pile of papers in front of him and tossed them up into the air. Like a parachute, the pile opened high above their heads, then began drifting downward in slow circles. Gortvai recognized one of the papers. It was the German Democratic Republic's pale-blue letter ordering eight carloads of early garden peas. It fluttered past Alajos Sandor's head and then, with a soft rustle, comfortably settled down in the farthest corner of the room. A little plaster dribbled down on it. 'May the light of eternity shine upon it,' said Sandor with mock solemnity.

At this point, giving up its assault on the windowpane, the bee hummed across the room and alighted, exhausted, on the naked light bulb dangling from the ceiling.

Sandor jumped up. 'Why torment the poor creature?' He pushed the window open energetically. 'Air,' he murmured, lifting his face to the tingling light. 'Air—absolutely free of charge. The day after tomorrow I'll be thirty.'

The telephone rang, Sandor answered. 'Oh, good morning, Comrade Holcz, and how is your health bearing up?' He winked at Gortvai, who was making frantic gestures. 'We're surviving, surviving; getting ready for tomorrow's meeting; it'll be a great success, believe me, a tremendous success...' In the receiver the hoarse contralto of the Ministry's Chief of Personnel growled something. 'My colleague, Gortvai?' Alajos Sandor winked again. 'Gortvai not here? The pride of our outfit, whom the Party Committee has nominated for special recognition?' Covering the mouthpiece with his palm, he handed over the receiver. 'Madame Lafarge herself,' he said to Gortvai. 'A new order, I suppose. Or a new decapitation. Who knows?'

Gortvai took the receiver. 'At your service, Comrade Holcz...'

They spoke only a few seconds. 'Yes,' said Gortvai. Then, nervously:

'Right away?' Then, giving up: 'Right away.' He searched for a pencil in his pocket. Alajos Sandor thoughtfully handed him his opened fountain pen. 'AK-142,' he jotted down. 'I undersand, Comrade Holcz. A Pobieda sedan—parked in Jozsef Square ... And what ... might this be ... all about?' He waited, 'I'll find out? I see. Yes. See you soon.' He hung up gingerly.

Alajos Sandor laughed. 'And what did the old bag want?'

Gortvai was in no mood for joking, at least not now. He knew he should leave immediately, but instead he started

putting his desk in order. Four folders: red, blue, green, yellow. In the bottom drawer he discovered some dust. He pulled the drawer out and blew into it energetically; the dust slapped him in the face. But he did not even curse. Meekly he wiped his face with his snow-white handkerchief.

'The corners of your eyes, too,' Alajos Sandor said, gently now. 'Where are you going?' he asked.

Gortvai shrugged. 'I don't know. Some kind of a car is waiting for me in Jozsef Square.'

The sun shone in through the open window, and in the spilling radiance dust particles danced—grains of dust which had lain in Gortvai's drawer, hiding: the enemy. 'Come on,' said Alajos Sandor, 'why be so worried? The lady has been known to call you before.' But he did not sound as though he believed his own calm. Suddenly he got up from his desk and stood in the spotlight of sunshine, his statue, hunched against an approaching storm, immobilized by an incalculable vulnerability. Gortvai watched, horrified, almost forgetting his own feelings. But then Sandor burst out laughing. 'What are you waiting for?' he asked, wiping his forehead. 'Hot, isn't it? What crazy weather.' He was perspiring. 'Say, how about bringing me a jar of honey when you come back?'

Gortvai carefully locked his desk and pocketed the key. The unpredictable ebb and flood of Sandor's emotions had ceased to bother him long ago. He had become sleepy and could barely struggle into his topcoat. Oh, to have a good sleep, Gortvai thought with relish, my God, what luxury! Come Sunday, I'll just sleep and sleep. Won't get up all day. I'll have Bori come over and make me a nice veal goulash with dumplings.

Perhaps he was sleeping already; he couldn't be sure, for Alajos Sandor's voice came to him from somewhere very far off, from the depths of mists and millennia, gray and indifferent.

'Soul-squashing,' said the voice; 'soul-squashing plus counter-selection equals people's democracy ... soul-squashing plus counter-selection equals ...'

Nothing equals nothing, Gortvai thought as he walked out into the street and stood dazed for a moment in the sparkling lightfall, from which it follows, of necessity, that everything equals everything. Nonsense. 'Sorry,' said a passerby who had just stepped on Gortvai's foot. Gortvai smiled with forgiving warmth. 'Think nothing of it.' The toe of my shoe does not equal me and I don't equal the toe of my shoe. Which is still

another lie. Does the toe of the shoe feel pain when someone steps on it? The old Latin teacher sat behind his table and stroked his gray, Christlike beard. 'My dear boy,' he said with a sweetly threatening smile, 'say something. Say the sun is shining, if you like, but say something.' *Sunt lacrimae rerum*, sir. The toe of the shoe weeps when they step on it, sir. I, too, weep when they step on me. What's the difference between me and the toe of the shoe, sir?

The light changed and Gortvai stepped off the curb. But he did not move on. Down the street a jet-black panther with green flashing eyes was stepping high in a tight skirt. Her gaze fell on his provocatively and then she whisked past him. Gortvai's nostrils dilated. What a perfume! If I knew her, he thought, she would have smiled. But I don't know her. So much the better.

The panther stopped at the corner of Gusev Street and bent her right knee slightly. Rosy lace peeped out from under her slashed skirt. Madness, Gortvai thought, but logical. What do I do if she turns around? I'll tell her I've got to rush now but will meet her this evening at the Café Anna. Just then the panther looked back over her shoulder. I should have guessed it, Gortvai remonstrated with himself; these bitches can always tell when they're not running any risk. She knows I haven't time to make a pass at her—that's why she's so relaxed. God, what legs! AK-142. Pobieda. In Jozsef Square. If I'm five minutes late, it won't matter a bit. The panther hesitated, somewhat disappointed, and moved on. Gortvai stared after her stupidly. That's the end of that. Duty, he sighed—duty triumphs over the passions, Comrade Holcz. Oh, why doesn't the whole world just stop dead in its tracks?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Zoltan walked straight from Karolinszky's office to his own. Entering it, he saw a slim, suntanned man sitting behind his desk reading a book. He stopped.

'Shut the door,' said the stranger without looking up. 'And come closer.' Zoltan obeyed mechanically. 'Take a seat,' the man said, pointing to the chair in front of the desk, and only then did he raise his head. 'Don't be so nervous. One shouldn't

be nervous unless one has cause to be. Have you?’

Zoltan ignored the question and sat down. The stranger replaced the book in the rather disorderly pile of books, folders and newspapers on the desk. Zoltan felt the man's gaze upon him. His first flush of anger was yielding to a grayness which he knew the stranger would recognize as a sign of maximum tension.

‘Strange things have been happening in this place of yours, Comrade Zoltan, very strange things indeed. Would you please tell me in a few words what you yourself think of the situation?’ He leaned back comfortably in the chair but kept his eyes on the young doctor.

Zoltan was relieved to hear the low, calmly offensive voice of the stranger again. When he had first seen the man sitting in the chair behind the desk, a reversal of the normal relationship between host and guest, Zoltan had lost even those shreds of assurance which he had forced upon himself while walking back to his office. The tone of superior calm, the lazy, comfortable movements, the irony of that first question indicated not merely that the stranger knew the answer to it in advance but also that Zoltan's answer was not in the least important to the man's evaluation of the situation, that the stranger had not only a reason but also the right to occupy Zoltan's chair without asking. Zoltan was angry at himself. Why should I be afraid of him? After all, he wants what I want. Why am I afraid of him, then?

‘I don't know quite what you are hinting at, Comrade...’ he said quickly, pausing to stress the omission of a name in order to call attention to the fact that the customary introduction had not been performed. ‘I don't know exactly...’ He tried to speak calmly and clearly, but the muscles of his throat contracted, as if he hadn't had a drop of water for weeks. His mind rejected fear while his instincts were alive with a peculiar, oppressive uncertainty that dried out his throat and made his palms sweat. How stupid!

‘Exactly?’ the stranger repeated. ‘So Comrade Zoltan doesn't know exactly...’ The luminous gray eyes stared at the victim unblinkingly. A pretty dull rabbit, the boa constrictor thought. He scares too quickly. What shall I do with it? I won't swallow it; I'm sure it's unpalatable. He was disgusted with the young doctor's virginal innocence, and it occurred to him for a second that the Party Secretary might be acting. But as he took a closer look at the strained face, he immediately rejected that idea. Innocent, he thought, suppressing a smile,

and how innocent! But not for long. You lose your virginity in the working-class movement the moment you realize that, though the theory is perfect, mistakes are sometimes made in practice. Real love, however, comes only after the deflowering. Up to then it's all masturbation. The history of our party is, fundamentally, the history of the struggle between the believers and the unbelievers. The problem is only that the believers fight for the purity of the idea and the unbelievers for the power. But why call this a problem? The believers go to the stake and the unbelievers gobble up the fried chicken. This is natural. Things become dangerous only when the unbelievers have liquidated all the believers and turn upon each other.

'Who is responsible?' he asked suddenly.

Zoltan was unable to extricate himself from the crippling spell cast upon him by the gray eyes.

'I think,' he said in a low voice, 'it is very difficult . . .'

'I am not interested in your difficulties. I am interested in your opinion.'

'This morning . . . when I got here . . .'

'Cause of death?'

'Coronary thrombosis, but . . .'

'Could it have been prevented?'

'Perhaps . . . yes, I think . . .'

'Yes or no?'

'Please, Comrade, it is impossible to give a simple answer.'

'The fourth within a month. What is this? A strange coincidence? God's will? Accident, bad luck?'

'Bad luck,' Zoltan said quickly. 'Very regrettable, of course.'

'Rather strange, don't you think? It's always top Party functionaries. Doesn't there seem to be a certain pattern in it, Comrade Party Secretary?'

'Do you mean to say . . .'

'Exactly.'

'No,' Zoltan cried, alarmed. 'No, no.'

'I see.' The stranger rose. His lankness made Zoltan, who had sunk low in his chair, even more nervous. 'The Comrade Party Secretary is reassuringly firm in his conviction. The Comrade Party Secretary is obviously unaware of the nature of the class struggle. Thank you. I have no more questions.' At the door he turned back. His large gray eyes had narrowed; the spring sunshine streaming in through the window fell on his smooth brown hair, slightly graying at the temples. 'I'm sure I don't have to call your attention to the strictly confidential character of our talk.' Then he was gone.

For a while Zoltan was unable to move. The enemy, the principal of the Party School had said, triumphantly settling his black-framed spectacles more firmly on his nose, as we know so well from the example of the great Soviet Union, concentrates on subversive work within the leading organ of the working class: the Party. In the heart, Comrades, in the very heart . . . The enemy, thought Zoltan. The concept had always been abstract, cold, lifeless, indefinable, a formula whose evil significance had made him shudder but had never really touched him because he felt sure that the competent organs of State and Party watched vigilantly and incorruptibly over the toiling people. At that moment, however, a direct, personal relationship sprang up between himself and the enemy who had stepped into three-dimensional life from the obscurity of books and notes. Zoltan felt shame for his own criminal negligence. He should have known. He should have detected the enemy long ago. But then, who was it? Karolinszky? He knew the professor well (or so he had believed); he was fully aware of the fact that the professor had only contempt for the regime and, because he regarded underhanded subversion as beneath him, made no bones about his attitude. But to kill deliberately, for money, as the agent of a foreign power . . . No, Karolinszky could safely be discarded as a suspect.

He rose and went and sat behind his desk. This calmed him a little. Dr. Bereznay? Nonsense. A well-bred boy like that would never stoop to such things; he simply didn't need to . . . But his upper-class background . . . Zoltan's security deserted him. The world which an hour ago had still seemed solid and firm suddenly quaked under his feet; his judgment, which he would never have doubted, had been torn from its roots in rationality by the whirlwind of surprise, fright, terror and suspicion, and now blew hither and thither in the flurry of his thoughts. The radiologist? Dr. Wass? Or Feldheimer? Could it be Feldheimer? Everything seemed possible and impossible in the same flash; arguments rose for and against only to disintegrate and cede to new arguments and counter-arguments in which the probable appeared improbable and the improbable probable. A prey to his thoughts. Zoltan felt for the first time in his life a horrible helplessness that bespattered everything and everybody with the poison of suspicion and thereby imperiled his own life also. What if they said that I . . . The shadow of a man with graying temples hovered in the doorway. 'In the name of the State Security Organization . . .'

he said indifferently. 'Come with me, please.' What would I reply? Zoltan thought with a shudder. How would I prove my innocence? To whom would I explain that it's all slander? And to whom could I turn for help? He jumped up and ran from his room.

The clock in the corridor said noon. He walked toward the operating theater in a daze and stopped Feldheimer at the door: 'Would you mind coming to my office at six o'clock?' Zoltan said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rezi hung up the telephone with a feeling of alarm. Pickled pigs' feet with lemon juice for dinner, her brother had said curtly. Where could she possibly get . . . and why that winter dish on this hot spring day? What could be the matter with Toni? She stood there, pale and helpless under Alice Weszelka's unsympathetic stare. 'Is anything wrong, Rezi dear?' the dark, emaciated girl had asked. 'Is there anything I can do?' 'Thank you,' Rezi had said. 'It's very kind of you, but . . .' With sudden decision she ran into Lautenburg's office to ask him for time off.

Lautenburg, the plump managing director of the Hungarian People's Fruit and Vegetable Canning Authority, was sipping his eleven-o'clock black coffee. Rezi's entrance obviously startled him. Carefully he put his cup down on the paper-strewn desk. 'Uncle Pista . . .' Rezi stuttered, 'I . . . my . . .'

'Calmly,' Lautenburg said. 'Calmly, my child. Sit down and tell me what has happened.' He looked cheerfully at Rezi with his little hedgehog eyes that disappeared completely when he smiled between his fleshy cheeks and his eyebrows, which were like graying whiskers. 'Well?' Rezi stammered out the first idiotic lie that came into her head. 'Too bad, too bad,' Lautenburg said, 'but don't be so worried. This means that you want to take the day off.' Rezi nodded. 'All right, all right,' he assented in his deep baritone.

For several minutes Rezi stood undecided on the corner of Gusev Street in the sudden warm shower that drenched her hair, ran down her blouse and wet her stockings; she didn't even notice it. The cobbled street running straight toward the

Danube emptied. A disagreeable odor of rawhide emanated from the neighboring building and pushed into the doorways, shops, narrow city courtyards, apartments and offices. A truck came around the corner. 'You'll spoil your hairdo, Comrade,' called the driver from behind the wheel, pushing his beret back from his forehead. 'Want a lift?' The girl began to run in the opposite direction.

She was in luck. At the butcher shop, the manager (the owner before the shop was nationalized) had known Rezi since her childhood. He produced a few slender pigs' feet from under the counter and held them out to her politely, with a conspiratorial smile.

Rezi slipped the precious loot into her shopping bag, smiled back and left. Feeling somewhat relieved, she set out for home. Now there was only a lemon to be found, but that wouldn't be too difficult. The rain had stopped as she reached the entrance to her building.

Rezi had moved into the new seven-story apartment house eighteen months after her father's death. Until then she had stayed at her brother's house in Pasaret. She had never felt happy there; she longed for the rural neighborhood of her childhood, with its stunted bushes, murmuring mills, tumble-down wooden huts. But when Toni had bought the new apartment for her and she found herself nicely established yet alone on the sunny heights of the seventh floor, she had been engulfed by a wave of homesickness for Pasaret. It was too late, though.

Before starting to cook she telephoned Klari, her brother's secretary. The line was busy. Rezi put down the receiver and gazed out of the window, torn by anxiety. Pupak, the cat, mewed to be taken on her lap, where it curled up and fell silent. Rezi hugged the animal close to her breast. 'Poor Toni,' she said in a low voice, 'something must have gone wrong. He works so hard. We'll make him a nice dinner. You'll get some meat, too, if you behave.' Rezi dialed again. 'A lemon?' Klari asked. 'But of course, Rezi dear. You can have as many as you want. Will you come for them or do you want me to send them over?'

'I'll come and get them,' Rezi said hesitatingly. 'Around seven-thirty all right?'

She went into the kitchen and began her preparations. She washed the meat thoroughly, sliced a few onions and put water on the stove to boil. She worked silently, quickly, expertly; after a while her surprise and fright yielded to her pleasure in

the cooking and in the idea of serving her brother. Rezi left the meat to simmer and sat down in the armchair behind her father's desk, swinging her foot absent-mindedly; there was nothing for her to do for a while now. For a few minutes she fell into a dreamless sleep.

She woke with a start, her heart thumping. The radio was humming softly on the small table beside the bed. Light streamed in through the large glass door to the balcony. The furniture shone on the bright waxed floor; the picture frames sparkled. Everything was in its place, clean, disciplined, tedious. But suddenly the order that had for years constituted not only the framework but also the content of her life was staring back at her with a malicious grin, holding up its inherent emptiness like a mirror. She shivered in that hard glittering cone of light, seized by the senseless loneliness of her own existence. She jumped up from the chair and ran out on the balcony.

The big balcony high up in the sunshine, divided from a similar balcony belonging to the next flat by nothing but a tall frosted-glass partition, was Rezi's favorite spot on summer evenings, fresh spring mornings and languid autumn afternoons. On three sides red geraniums and morning-glory grew in green wooden boxes among lush, glossy ferns. To the left of the door stood a small table covered with a white embroidered tablecloth; next to it, a low wicker chair and a deck chair whose canvas would sometimes be caught by a sudden gust of wind and flap like a sail. Down below, beyond the trees and bushes of the park, the Danube flowed gray and its ships hooted impatiently. On the Pest shore, moldering wooden warehouses stood dark against the light, while cranes bent their long necks inquisitively over the hatches of the ships. Along the paved slope of Margaret Island, houseboats rocked in the lapping waters, and the trees threw their shadows over the paths and flowerbeds beneath them. On summer evenings she could hear the sentimental waltzes played by the orchestra of the Casino on the island; sometimes she could even hear the clatter of dishes and the waiters calling to one another.

'Rezi,' Mother had said severely (she had always been severe, and the brown eyes, dark under her blonde crown of hair, flashed angrily), 'you're getting flustered again. Sit down quietly and think!' There I go getting flustered, Rezi thought. What would you do in my place, Mother? I won't sit down. Why do you tell me to sit down? Whether you wanted me or

not, I am still your daughter. Gortvai said to me this morning, 'Rezi, dear, you are so pale, why don't you take a short holiday? The fresh mountain air would do you good. Go and pick violets in the Mecsek or the Matra ...' What do you think would do me good, Mother? At this time of the year there are no violets left. Once Gortvai took me to the movies. Mrs. Mikecz says I should join the Party. My brother is a highly respected intellectual, my work is satisfactory, she would sponsor me—but what would Toni say?

She raised her pale, tearless face and turned it toward the sun yearningly, like a big white sunflower. Solitude cut into her flesh like a cold, sharp knife but drew no blood; the anaesthetized pain was more tormenting than an open wound. Ever since Richard had failed to return to his base from a night flight, Rezi had hoped that time would release her from her self-erected prison and, by assuaging her nostalgia for the past, awaken a desire for the future. But this had not happened.

They told her that Riki's face, that puckish countenance full of the proud ignorance of youth, had not been disfigured when his plane ripped into the cold ground. As the years went by, her memory of his dark eyes and freckled skin, the funny way his ears stood out, grew as if, in the crashing plane, in the surprising proximity of sudden death, the young man had put a curse on Rezi (whom he truly loved) and thus revenged himself on death by assuming a spiteful immortality. It was a potent curse: Rezi could not forget her lieutenant and the night she had spent at his Tukor Street flat immediately before he was sent to the Russian front, in November 1943. They had intended to get married the following day, but her brother had intervened. Toni bundled his desperately protesting young sister into his car, drove her to the railway station and put her on the train. The Zibolens, old friends of the family, who had no idea of what was happening—the professor's brief telegram had informed them only of Rezi's imminent arrival—helped Rezi off the train, made her swallow a hefty dose of Cognac from a flask and drive back to the manor at top speed. Rezi lay in bed, delirious, and it was three days before her hosts learned what had taken place. Zibolen wiped his pince-nez frantically, his wife brought the house down with her lamentations, but all in vain. Everybody knew there was no appeal against the professor's will.

Rezi never found out the reason for the professor's violent rejection of her lover, and after the first storm of tears she

gave up trying. She resigned herself to the unalterable, still hoping, while the young man lived, and after his death not hoping but accepting with a humility beyond any religion.

Now she stood at the balcony railing, shivering as if she were feverish. She never ventured that far out on the balcony if she could help it, and when the plants had to be watered she would keep her face turned toward her apartment. She was afraid. The street below swirled like a river of glass, and the seven-story drop, which reminded her of another dreadful dive, rushed with a breath-taking roar to her brain. In sudden vertigo, her mind dissected the imagined fall into tiny fractions and made it seem so real that her stomach contracted and rose to her throat as in a rapidly descending lift, and although she made a desperate effort to step back from the railing her muscles refused to obey her will and she continued to stand there, staring down into the eddying chasm. But this time there was no fall. The bottom of the abyss, where buses, cars, passers-by shrank to featureless ants hiding the mysterious meaning of their lives behind the comical senselessness of their movements, began to sparkle like water. I have never seen the sea, she thought. Toni says the sea is cold. I wish it were warm. And soft. Tiny fish swim in the sundrenched water. Among the pebbles on the bottom, small crabs. Seaweeds. Shells. There was a big shell on Father's desk. 'Just put it to your ear,' Father would say, smiling. 'Can you hear it roar?' She could never hear anything. 'Try harder,' said Father. 'It's the sea.'

'No,' Rezi said, 'I can't hear anything, Daddy.' Father looked at her for a long time. 'You hear it only if you really want to,' he said in a low voice. 'Daddy,' Rezi said, 'I want to have sea; buy me some.' Father laughed. 'Mr. Muhlbacher, two pounds of sea for my daughter, and give her the best, please...' 'I'm afraid...' Mr. Muhlbacher said, opening his arms wide, 'I'm afraid, sir, we're all out of sea...' 'All gone?' Her father roared with laughter. True enough, Rezi thought, I should have known. All gone. Everything is gone.

Suddenly her attention was caught by the cat, which, till then, had been sleeping curled up in the wicker chair but had now crept to the edge of the balcony and was peering down into the street, sniffing the depths, its whiskers twitching. Frightened, Rezi pulled the cat back. The cat mewed and struck with its bared claws at Rezi, who pushed the animal away from her with unusual revulsion. Then she sat down exhausted in the chair. In her hand she crushed some flower petals. A fat, spiraling cloud of smoke rose from the neigh-

boring chimney. Tiny, pricking particles of soot showered down on her hair, nose, shoulders. What is this ache, she asked herself, what is it that hurts so? The world, shining around her with unchanged freshness, gave no answer, and with a sudden deep sigh Rezi realized the silly helplessness that prompted her question. Gortvai was lonely too. So was Aliz. And Lautenburg. All the faces, in whose reflected light she had existed for years without ever trying to discover the strange laws of their galaxy, revolved in the magnetic field of her life with the pale indifference of stars, as if the force that bound them together were also keeping them severely apart. Her loneliness suddenly expanded and embraced everyone who lived close to her in loneliness. She felt lighter. Her solitude was part of the solitude of those breathing around her; instead of isolating her, it united her with those who, abandoned and alone, were trying to survive in an alien world. The malice, villainy and baseness she encountered day after day were only weapons of self-defense against the attacks of an even more malicious, villainous and base power. Suddenly, as if understanding that the Savior had died for those who were forever beyond saving, Rezi hid her face in her hands and broke into painful tears.

CHAPTER NINE

Feldheimer stood at the window and watched the hillside wrapping itself slowly in the smoke-colored dusk. The alarms of the morning had almost completely abated, the imminent investigation was hardly mentioned, and whenever he started talking about it to someone, the other would, after a few seconds of nervous silence, steer the conversation to another subject, as if he wanted to save his little store of strength for the difficult days to come. Feldheimer loathed self-deception even more passionately than bare-faced lies, but when he noticed that it wasn't self-deception which lurked behind the silence, that it was fear, a poisonous, sticky fear enveloping the entire hospital, he suddenly felt exhausted. We are helpless, he thought; we are all helpless. He felt as if he were locked in a narrow prison cell the walls of which, as in one of Poe's short stories, were drawing imperceptibly closer and confining the

captive's steps to a gradually decreasing space. Does one have to jump down the well? Feldheimer thought. Is there no other escape? It was possible to substitute tactics for ethics, but what can you substitute for tactics when they have become ethics? Which was preferable—to be blown to bits in the minefields trying to flee to the West, or to confess that you had been recruited by the C.I.A. while still in your mother's womb? What was most astonishing about the system was not how aimless power had become but how flexibly the rigid dogma of power adapted itself to its aimlessness. Fear, centrally organized and directed, was used to make the individual mind accept this aimlessness as a natural state of being. With noteworthy results! Here is this poor Zoltan sitting in front of me, the classical example, a decent, respectable young man, and what does he do? He makes a desperate effort to tell me something that would prove that his faith has force and his force faith. Very illuminating. If I were more cynical I would help him out of his quandary. But my cynicism suffices only for self-defense; there is none left over for others. We are all marionettes, my dear Comrade Zoltan, however hard we try to prove the contrary. He sat down at the desk. I am in no hurry, he thought tiredly. I have a whole people's democratic eternity before me.

Zoltan was also silent. Half an hour before he had known exactly what he would say to Feldheimer; he had repeated to himself the hard, censorious words mixed with a definite warning and a mild but unmistakable threat. But face to face with Feldheimer, he could hardly speak; instead of hatred he was filled with a pale, vibrating sympathy that pointed toward understanding rather than condemnation. Enemy, Zoltan thought, enemy? Dusk, streaming in at the window, dyed Feldheimer's intelligent, sometimes twitching face an even gray. It was a distant face, sarcastic, alien, yet not unpleasant. The man sitting opposite him had nothing in common with the lifeless mask put together from slander, accusations, suspicions and reports. He was a worn, exhausted human being who did not in the least resemble the mass of material locked away carefully in files, in desk drawers and safes labeled 'Dr. György Feldheimer.'

'For heaven's sake, Feldheimer,' said the Party Secretary at last, 'why do you go on acting the way you do? It won't do any good.'

'Do any good?' The stomatologist stared out of the window into the thickening darkness. 'Can you tell me what, if any-

thing, will do any good?' Why am I arguing with him? he thought. He wasn't in the mood. All he wanted was fresh air.

'I'm surprised at you,' Zoltan said under his breath.

Feldheimer looked at him curiously, taken aback by this quiet retreat. Zoltan was on the defensive. A puppet with a soul, Feldheimer thought suddenly. 'Go ahead,' he said, 'be surprised; I'm at your disposal.'

Zoltan rose. 'Damn you, Feldheimer,' he said, 'don't you see what's going on?' He sat down again, almost doubled up, as if seized by a cramp. Of course Feldheimer knows what is going on. He knows exactly. Probably better than I. He took hold of himself and straightened up. 'I thought you would behave like an intelligent man and listen to me for three minutes. It seems I was mistaken.'

'You were mistaken,' Feldheimer echoed. 'You were mistaken, my boy. Which proves that you are still closer to our Neanderthal past than to our Communist present. You couldn't even guess how glad I am that you were mistaken. *Errare humanum est*. Remember? What school did you attend, Zoltan?' He walked toward the door.

'I went to the Piarist,' Zoltan replied with a pale smile. 'Where are you going?'

'Clerical influence,' Feldheimer said. 'Where? I don't know. I am going. Should I stay? I attended the Jewish school, as you can see from my *curriculum vitae*. A good educational institution. Inferiority complex.' He opened the door.

'Wait,' Zoltan called hesitatingly. 'I'd like to ask you something.'

The doctor let go of the doorknob. 'Go ahead,' he said absent-mindedly rather than curiously. 'Ask away.'

'What's the point?' Zoltan asked, troubled.

'The point?' Against his will Feldheimer smiled. He knew only too well what the other meant. 'The point of what, may I ask?'

'Of your behavior,' Zoltan said dryly. 'All your swashbuckling.'

Feldheimer was still smiling. Poor boy, he thought. He does try hard. He is trying to understand something that I don't understand myself. What's the point?

'There isn't any,' he said then. 'I give you my word of honor that there isn't any point. Don't you believe me?'

'No,' Zoltan said. 'You're a strange fellow. Why do you hate us so?'

'You,' Feldheimer asked, 'or the plural?'

'There's no difference,' Zoltan said with clumsy pride.

'Then that's why,' Feldheimer said.

'I see.' The Party Secretary looked up. He was angry again.

'Another cause for rejoicing,' Feldheimer said. 'Although I don't think there's much chance of that just now. May I leave?'

The two men stood face to face. Zoltan grasped the other's shoulder. Feldheimer took a calm step backward. 'May I leave?'

'Let me warn you once more...' Zoltan closed the door behind the two of them; they stood in the empty, echoing corridor. The lilac-tinted neon lights hummed softly.

'That it won't do me any good?' Feldheimer was no longer smiling. His face was stiff and hostile.

'Yes...' the Party Secretary replied. That's all I can tell, he thought. What a miserable situation!

'Naturally,' the stomatologist said coldly. 'Sooner or later the fist of our working class will crush my kind of vermin. That's what you were thinking, right? What else could you think? That this idiot—meaning myself—will rejoin the choir of proletarian angels and sing along with you the praise of the Lord who must be loved but never judged? Perhaps. That this idiot may come to his senses and shut up before they arrest him? Perhaps. That he may try to escape to the West? Impossible. Mainly because in the name of Socialist Democracy our southern and western frontiers are protected by minefields, barbed-wire fences, machine guns, police dogs and other splendid institutions. Or did it perhaps occur to you that in the long run this idiot might be right? No, such a thought would never occur to you, Zoltan Zoltanovich. Luckily. However,' he concluded, throwing his raincoat over his shoulders, 'I should like to remind you that not only were the aristocrats guillotined in the Place de Grève but also the Jacobins. Still, in the last analysis, if we look at things from the dialectical point of view, it all adds up to the same thing.'

The Party Secretary remained alone in the quietly humming corridor.

Feldheimer shared an apartment on Bathory Street, opposite the dreary yellow building of the Ministry of Culture. A year before, after years of squabbles and hate-filled clashes, his wife had finally thrown him out. He didn't have a ghost of a chance of getting a place for himself, he had thought. It took extra-

ordinary luck to lay one's hands on even a co-tenancy. But one day he mentioned his problem to a patient—the president of the V District Council, a fleshy-lipped, bedroom-eyed lady already running to fat. She took pity on him and invited him to her apartment for a cup of tea one Sunday afternoon. Two weeks later the doctor had an allocation order. But his joy was short-lived.

Every time he set foot in the narrow, disorderly, half-cleaned room (he could never get used to the vicissitudes of bachelor life) and paused at the door, he remembered his mother, that dark-eyed, dark-haired woman who had anxiously watched her son's wild, almost desperate flight from home. She had not been able to understand what had happened to her favorite child. And how could he have explained to her why he loathed the shiny, wax-yellow parquet floor, the thick, soft Persian carpets, the stiffly ironed crocheted tablecloths, the sparkling silver candlesticks, the comfortable armchairs? 'This room is a beautiful example of petty-bourgeois prosperity,' Baranyi had said to him late one night, sipping the last of the Cognac. 'You preach water, my good Comrade, but you drink wine yourself.' Baranyi was a Fascist sympathizer and Feldheimer had invited him over only to hear about his experiences in the Third Reich. Otherwise the leftist students at the university barely spoke to him. 'Shut your filthy mouth,' Feldheimer hissed. He was sitting on the floor by the desk, on the Persian rug his father had recently gotten at a reduced price because he played cards with the carpet merchant. 'I can shut it,' Baranyi said, giving Feldheimer a challenging sidelong glance. 'I can shut it, Comrade, but your metaphysical idealism will still be just like my materialism, the only difference being that it denies to others what it allows itself. Sterling silver, isn't it?' He was playing with a cigarette case that Feldheimer had received from his uncle for his twentieth birthday. 'An expensive little item. It would support several families for a few weeks in that slum where you distribute leaflets on freedom and equality.' He laughed drunkenly. Feldheimer flushed. 'In certain circles,' Baranyi continued, 'you are what is called an armchair revolutionary.' 'The apartment belongs to my father,' Feldheimer answered coldly, 'and anyway, it's no business of yours.' Why am I making excuses? he thought. Fascist rat. For a long time he had refused any allowance from his father, who had at first stroked his smart little goatee with nervous surprise, then shrugged his shoulders with the haughty self-assurance of very short men. Feldheimer had walked around

town, around the university where he was a medical student, in his fraying shirts and faded raincoat (he stopped wearing his winter coat even in the severest cold to identify himself further with the proletariat). He and his parents had become completely estranged.

Today he would gladly have gone back to that petty-bourgeois prosperity, but it was no longer there. He had fled from a labor battalion in the summer of 1944 and hurried to Budapest to establish contact with the underground Communist Party. He learned of his parents' death only two weeks later. They had died together on the fourth floor of a Damjanich Street block of apartments into which they had been compelled to move by the Anti-Jewish Laws, and nothing remained of them but a veil of dust, slivers of wood and bloody shreds of flesh. Although it was strictly forbidden by the Party for security reasons, he went that same morning to the bombed building to say a last goodbye to them. From there he went on to their former apartment but found nothing except a comfortable armchair and a broken-legged dresser; the chair was the one in which his father used to doze after a heavy Sunday dinner, and on the dresser used to stand the two baroque candlesticks given to his mother as a wedding gift by a cousin who had since emigrated to America. The neighbors knew nothing. The town lay in ruins. The factories were idle. It was freezing cold. There was hardly any food. He decided to give up the search for information, made his way back to the university and set to work clearing up the rubble and organizing the Party. Three weeks later, to his utter amazement, he was summoned before the Central Control Committee of the newly re-established Hungarian Communist Party and severely reprimanded. As the indictment put it: *By subordinating the interests of the Party and the Resistance to his personal emotions and by flouting the Party's explicit orders and visiting the house where his parents died, Comrade György Feldheimer had let his petty-bourgeois sentimentalism gravely imperil the struggle of the Anti-Fascist Front.*

But he had kept the two quietly aging pieces of furniture to this day. The comfortable armchair stood under the window and the dresser in the left corner of his room, somewhat wobbly because the substitute leg Feldheimer had nailed onto it was always coming off. Now, remembering the narrow, dis-orderly room to which he had to go home, Feldheimer was overcome with sudden nausea. He stopped in his tracks and

turned back toward the hospital, which was already half engulfed by the darkness, its windows shining evenly in the dusk.

Out of the revolving door Rezi stumbled, with a small wicker basket in her hand. The stomatologist stopped inquisitively to let her approach. Rezi was a rare guest at the hospital; Feldheimer hadn't laid eyes on her since about a year ago. What was she doing here at this time? She must have heard. So the grapevine worked perfectly. Had the professor sent an agent to report on the situation? Although he hated Karolinszky with a passionate, uncontrollable hatred because, in his opinion, he collaborated with the regime although his name, wealth and past would have allowed him to defy it (unlike Feldheimer, who had to live on his work whether he liked it or not), he immediately discarded this thought because it did not fit into the picture he had formed of the professor over the years.

As Rezi approached, her features were blurred in the dusk, but they emanated a strained anxiety which the doctor immediately recognized and in a flash identified with his own. Feldheimer smiled, placed his right hand on his heart, bowed almost to the ground and held out his left in a broad gesture to Rezi.

He took two steps forward. 'Oh lemon! Let me see that lemon. A lovely lemon. A beautiful, yellow lemon. Smell it; it smells like lemon. I have an old aunt who always says, My boy, this cake would really be good if only I could have put in a little grated lemon peel. But there are no lemons. Nobody in this city has seen a lemon for years. Lemons, as everyone knows, have to be paid for in hard currency. The cellars of this beautiful state hospital, however, are full of them. These are growing pains, don't even try to find another cause. As the wise leader of our people has said: if we are not careful we'll eat the hen that could lay a golden egg for us tomorrow. When is that tomorrow? Until it comes, we just have to tighten our belts. The leaders of our Party show us the road on which following the example of the great Soviet Union, we have to advance. Without lemons.'

Feldheimer sensed Rezi's aversion, which, at any other time, would have made him leave her after a few polite words but now failed to touch him. His anger had become almost permanent over the last few years, and now it was bursting out like a geyser. He slipped his hand under Rezi's reluctant arm. 'I'm sorry that I can't offer you a lift, but my car is just being

overhauled. It has lost its tires you know. And the steering wheel. To tell the truth, I've also mislaid the motor somewhere. So shall we walk?

He squeezed Rezi's arm with such force that she caught her breath. 'Let me go,' she said, trembling. 'What do you want?'

'I beg your pardon!' the doctor exclaimed. 'I want nothing from you. Please forgive me.' What indeed do I want from her? he thought. What do I want from myself? At the bottom of the slope, Budakeszi Street was empty, almost deserted. The gaslights blinked palely. A streetcar rattled by, a bus hooted.

'Goodbye,' Rezi said suddenly and walked swiftly downhill.

'Where are you headed?' the doctor asked, but there was no reply. Harmless little thing, Feldheimer thought; how fortunate that there are a few of her sort left. Otherwise I would hang myself on the first branch. For a while he gazed blankly after Rezi till she was swallowed up by the darkness; then he set out toward the bus stop with slow, listless steps.

CHAPTER TEN

Karolinszky got home around six o'clock that evening, earlier than usual. On the little serving table in the dining room stood a glass of ice-cold white wine, which he emptied in one gulp; then he went straight into the bathroom. This was the long-established pattern of evening homecomings. Cold wine, lukewarm bath, fresh change of clothes, dinner alone or for two. Since his wife's death the professor generally had his mistresses come to his house. He loathed women's apartments: the odors; the bathrooms with drying panties, stockings, brassieres coquettishly aflutter; the suggestively unmade beds; the whispering: today you're sleeping at my place, at my place. The women came at eight, and at eleven-thirty sharp the taxi, ordered beforehand, pulled up behind the villa. The professor liked to sleep alone, stretched out and comfortable, and as there was only one narrow bed in his bedroom (he had allowed no one to set foot in his wife's room since her death) the women had no other choice. If he did go to his mistress's place it could mean only one of two things: the first night or the last. He began all his affairs by letting his hard gaze take in the woman's apartment without a single remark, and ended them

the same way, with a last pitiless glance. That's finished too, he would think vengefully, coming home down the deserted Pasaret Road, and it hasn't made me any wiser. He would light a cigarette and curse under his breath.

Only rarely did he go out to dinner, mostly in the summer, when he would sit alone in the poorly lit garden of some little Buda restaurant. But since these *bistros* had been nationalized or simply closed down, his outings had become still more rare. After his bath he would get dressed again, drink another glass of ice-cold wine and settle down in his study to think for a while. For years now he hardly read. Now and then old Eszter would throw out a pile of untouched newspapers and magazines. 'In today's *Szabad Nep* there is a most important article...' Dr. Zoltan would say. 'Undoubtedly, sir, you will want to...' 'I do not read,' the professor would answer. 'And you may report that.' The Party Secretary would smile sourly and the professor would leave the room before he could launch into a detailed exposition of the stand set forth in the article. Official views did not interest Karolinszky. Nobody's view interested him. Indifference had gradually insulated him from the world that was taking shape around him. During the war, when his fellow men were almost fanatically hanging over the radio, the professor would light a cigarette and drink another glass of cold white wine. He took cognizance of the war only as he was compelled to and as his interests required—namely, that good white wine was harder to come by and that there were more patients. The newspapers bulged with triumphant descriptions of the new German lines along the Carpathians. What a bore! he thought. Win or lose, nothing changes. The moralists prattle, the leaders order executions, people die. The meaning of our time is that there is no meaning. Gas chambers and concentration camps. Good old Malthus would turn green with envy if he were here to see it. No need to think; fortunately, there are slogans. Exterminate the Jews. Or exterminate the bourgeoisie. I know an even better one: exterminate the Jews, the bourgeoisie, the babies, the elderly, the women and the men. Then we can go home to sleep.

When the first Russian soldier appeared at the villa, the professor, after much explaining, dragged him to his upstairs office and stood him behind the X-ray machine. Jozsef Ferenc and Eszter stood at the door trembling with fright. When he had finished with the soldier—a stocky, blond young man, his eyes puffy from lack of sleep—he gave him a bottle of white wine and sent him away. The soldier patted old Eszter's white

hair, waved the wine and disappeared. The professor went back to the office, followed by the old couple. 'Look at this,' he said, holding the wet X-ray plate up to the window. 'Do you see?' 'What am I supposed to see?' asked old Eszter. 'Nothing,' said the professor. 'Ribs. Heart. Lungs.' He pulled out another plate from a large envelope in his files. 'Johannes Harp, Unterschärführer in the SS. Ribs. Heart. Lungs.' He took a swallow of wine. 'Murderers,' he said. 'The soldiers of the occupying armies. But that doesn't show here. Where does the soul dwell, my good, God-fearing woman?' Eszter turned away.

For a while after his bath the professor sat quietly at the open window of his study. He was tired and hungry. He looked out, through the needles of the slender silver pine, at the hills opposite; in the fast-falling darkness they assumed the shapes of friendly oafish dinosaurs, timorous at the approach of night. But the spectacle did not concern him; he was waiting for the dinner which he had ordered immediately upon leaving room C-17 by telephone to Rezi at her office. He had not even listened to Rezi's remonstrances—but, Toni dear, for God's sake—and hung up on her without giving a second's thought to whether his extraordinary demand could be met at all. Pickled pigs' feet sprinkled with lemon juice. He could feel his body go numb from hunger. At the hospital he had left untouched the lunch brought in to him by Klari; he refused to placate his hunger with any food other than what he had decided upon. Afterward, he telephoned to call off his weekly bridge game, which bored him anyway, using exhaustion as his excuse. 'My dear Karolinszky,' mouthed Mrs. Fellner, the aging wife of a once enormously rich contractor, saved by her Communist architect brother from expropriation, 'if you need anything, you know you can definitely count on me. You should rest in bed for a few days. You work hard enough. Only yesterday darling Ida was saying—you know that fat blonde who seemed to attract you so last week . . .' The allusion to his latest affair left him cold. He was used to the idea of Mrs. Fellner's discovering everything sooner or later. The woman was renowned for two things: her eyes, which raced with violet-colored restlessness from one person to the next, as if seeking to read secrets in the sudden tremor of a feature; and her mouth, which promptly passed on whatever she knew about friend or foe, about the stifling world she always cursed but rather enjoyed. Still, however big a blabbermouth she was, she did keep one thing to herself: that a year and a half ago, for a short while, she too had been his mistress.

He had then gone into the operating room, where preparations were being made for that afternoon's brain surgery. Zoltan was tinkering with the transfusion apparatus. From the washroom came the sounds of conversation. The professor recognized the voices: Bereznay, with his usual smoothness, was lecturing on the forthcoming investigation of C-17's death for the benefit of Feldheimer, that Trotskyite stomatologist. 'As I see it,' said Bereznay, 'the business can have serious consequences only if some proof of deliberate intent can be dredged up.' 'Proof?' grumbled Feldheimer. 'Proof? Isn't it one of the great achievements of our system that it has relegated proof to the dust heap along with other elements of bourgeois law?' The water gurgled loudly. 'Do you mean that...' This was Bereznay's voice. 'In plain words,' Feldheimer said, 'the system in its present phase considers everything that used to require proof as *ob ovo* proven. That is to say, you can tie yourself in knots and you will still be hanged. And if Karolinszky gets away with it, that can be ascribed to two basic facts.' 'Which are?' Someone turned off the tap. 'Which are, my esteemed comrade, that he is not a Jew and that he is not a Party member. Hell is reserved for Party members, with numbered seats. Those who only collaborate with our great Party must make do with purgatory. Then there are those who keep themselves completely aloof from the management of our people's troublesome affairs. At the right moment, they raise a voice in opposition, while holding their backsides out to the appropriate Party leaders for the execution of a certain rite. After the rite has been performed, they retreat, offended, to the fortress of their aloofness and are sent by the Political Committee for a two-week holiday at some workers' paradise. Do you understand, my boy?' Bereznay broke into neighing laughter.

Karolinszky felt nauseated. Before him stood Zoltan, his face red and angry. 'You will operate,' the professor said. 'Scour in.' Zoltan looked startled. Yesterday afternoon the professor had said he himself would remove the tumor. 'What are you gaping at?' Karolinszky asked. 'Didn't I make myself clear?' 'Yes,' the young doctor answered. 'Bereznay is ready for the operation,' he added in a low voice. 'There's time enough,' the professor said. 'They aren't hanging him yet. He's not a Party member.' He turned on his heel and left the operating theater. The nausea that had overwhelmed him a moment ago rose from his stomach to his throat. He walked along the corridor in a daze.

Karolinszky rose from his armchair and stretched his muscles. Hunger had now seeped through his whole body. The man groping about restlessly in the silent dusk amidst bookshelves, soft chairs, brightly shaded lamps and deep carpets was nothing but a huge ravenous stomach, a mass of evaporating juices, expanding and contracting blood vessels, pulsating, painful stimuli. He stumbled over the curled-up corner of the carpet and held onto the top of the desk. Behind his back he heard a dull thud. He fumbled for the desk chair and sat down. The soft spring breeze coming from the open window caressed the back of his neck. Then he switched on the desk lamp. A dusty photograph album lay on the floor; in its fall the photographs had spilled out. He looked down on their disorder absent-mindedly. Where had this come from? He poked at the album with the point of his shoe. Photography had been a passion with Flora, and she never left the house without the little camera he had bought for her on one of his trips to Paris. Through Flora's sad eyes bits of street, cherry trees in blossom, tousle-headed little girls, sparkling water and snow-clad mountain slopes had swum into the perpetuity of the lens. 'Toni, darling, just this once!' Flora had begged, but the professor had rudely turned his back on her. Now his broad, straight back lay there on the floor, just as Flora had snapped it. With a sudden movement he scooped up the pictures and spread them out on the empty desk.

There was Flora, smiling up a little forlornly, her head tilted to one side, the brown locks hanging over the white forehead as she climbed the granite side of Lidingo. Below her, in the light of the sea, a hazy Stockholm with its towers and waterways. In another picture stood Jozet Karolinszky, legal consultant to the British-Hungarian Bank, retired High Court judge, his face smoothly shaven and serene, resting one hand on the wrought-iron railing of the balcony and clasping a book in the other. The professor gazed for a long time at this face that had been so fresh and lively even in old age—distant, alien and still familiar. Flora had taken the old gentleman's picture in the last August of his life. The judge had risen from his sickbed for the occasion. He dressed slowly, shaved carefully, spent half an hour selecting the appropriate tie, then the appropriate book. He had died two weeks later, on the day the war broke out, as cheerfully as he had lived.

I should really visit his grave one day, the professor thought; he hadn't been there since the funeral. He had never liked his father, who called life a vale of joy and who had never been

concerned with anything except his own well-being, travel, comfortable train compartments, slender female ankles and heavy gold bracelets that he presented indiscriminately to every woman who understood the avidity in his blue eyes. The picture fell from his hand and dropped to the floor.

He lifted out a photograph of a young woman standing among oak trees, in front of her a little boy of six with a rabbit panting in his arms. 'If you don't behave,' Mother had said severely, 'you won't be allowed to go to Francsika for your holidays this year.' The hundred-acre wooded property that had once been his grandmother's dowry had been sold by Jozsef Karolinszky in the early Thirties, far below its value, as he was in urgent need of money to buy more thick golden bracelets. The professor, who had shrugged indifferently when his father told him of the sale, now looked at a photograph of the forester's lodge at Francsika with tired regret. He saw himself, sitting on the porch in a light cane chair beside the table loaded with wine bottles and glasses, in his leather jerkin and boots, his Mannlicher hunting rifle against his knee. Next to him sat Endre Zibolen, lawyer and landowner, in a brand-new green shag coat, a flashing gold-rimmed pince-nez on his nose, with a highly waxed mustache and shiny hair that exuded—even at a distance of twenty years—a sweetish, nauseating smell of pomade. The professor closed the album quickly and stood the picture against the black marble paper-weight on his desk. He had met this short, bespectacled, vague little man with his oily hair more than twenty years ago on the train from Warsaw to Budapest. In the middle of the night they had awakened to discover that their carriage was standing abandoned on the line with no locomotive, no train. The professor put on his coat over his pajamas and got off with Zibolen. The trainman who was standing at the end of the sleeping car in the icy wind showed them the broken coupling. Toward dawn it began to snow. By the time a locomotive arrived it was light.

A fortnight later the professor spent the weekend on Zibolen's estate. There he was introduced to Mrs. Zibolen's young girl friend, Flora Lehrer, the daughter of a prominent industrialist. He married her within three months. Zibolen was delighted. He adored this rigid, hard man and bore his indifference with a forgiving smile. He felt, rather than knew, that in a way the professor liked him too, but his doubts were never completely dispelled during their long association. In his own selfish way the professor did like this gentle little man. During

lonely hours he often played with the thought of what shape he would, at their next meeting, give to the soft wax that let itself be kneaded by his hands. I could turn him into a murderer if I wanted to, thought the professor, or would a Capuchin friar be better?

When, in the autumn of 1944, he learned that Endre Zibolen was preparing to go west with his wife and two daughters he felt a heavy, rising anger rather than pain. They were sitting in the garden on a white-painted bench in the shadow of an old lime tree. Noon was approaching; the usual air-raid warning was due any minute. The Americans' heavy bombers were beginning to assemble over Lake Balaton. 'Try to understand, Toni,' Zibolen stammered in a low voice. 'A landowner with twenty thousand acres is just what they want.' 'What they want?' the professor said. 'What you mean to say is that you're afraid.' He did not look at Zibolen, but he knew that the other man was cleaning his glasses with desperate zeal. 'All right, I'm afraid,' Zibolen replied. 'Is that better? I am not afraid of the Russians. But I have daughters, Toni. Aren't you afraid?' The professor still kept his eyes averted. 'Afraid of what?' he asked.

The sirens began wailing. Karolinszky's face did not change. For the first time the putty had resisted. Zibolen sighed, his eyes filled with tears; then he rose and left. The professor did not see him to the gate. He closed his eyes and remained there on the white bench, motionless in the autumn sunshine. The blindingly blue sky was criss-crossed with slowly fading snow-white stripes. The professor jumped to his feet, went indoors and poured a glass of iced white wine down his throat. With a single furious snap of his teeth he had expelled Zibolen from his memories for all time.

Moonshine poured into the room with a bluish glitter. The books, chairs, carpets seemed to levitate in the mysterious light that penetrated every corner. The professor became aware of approaching steps and turned around, startled. Eszter's shadow hovered in the wide glass door. 'It's almost eight o'clock,' the old woman said. 'Where do you want to eat your dinner?' The professor made no reply. The well-known voice hit him like a stone and he reeled backward into the present. 'I asked you where I should lay the table,' Eszter repeated.

'On the terrace,' the professor said hoarsely. Since his wife's death, Karolinszky had almost never been out on the terrace. 'You'll catch cold,' she said. 'It isn't summer yet.'

'Very thoughtful of you,' the professor said. 'But would you be kind enough to lay the table on the terrace?'

Without a word she went about her task.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The professor finished his meal with sudden zest. Rezi, who had been sitting across from her brother, shivering in the cool, humid air, rose immediately and collected the empty plates, the knife and fork smudged with grease, the curling bread crusts and the squeezed-out half lemon. She knew the professor could not bear to have the debris of a meal remain on his table even for a minute because it reminded him of the superfluous and senseless waste of time that eating involved. Karolinszky emptied his wineglass and leaned back in his chair, his eyes closed. He had eaten his fill and yet, in a strange way, he was still hungry. His mouth was full of the thick, heavy taste of the jellied pigs' feet which the wine was powerless to wash away, and he felt the lumps of fat meat settling in his stomach.

Eszter came out carrying the coffee tray. Rezi followed, wearing a wide colorful shawl over her shoulders. 'Was it good?' Rezi asked softly. The professor made no reply. 'Was it good, Toni dear?' Rezi repeated anxiously. She glanced at Eszter, who poured the coffee soundlessly, then retreated into the house. The professor did not open his eyes; he simply sat there behind his indifference, boredom and disgust.

'Say something,' he said.

'But, Toni dear . . .' Rezi whispered in desperation.

'Say something!' the professor repeated.

'What about?' Rezi asked. 'What do you want me to talk about?'

'It doesn't matter,' the professor said. 'Tell me about Paris.'

'But I've never . . .' Rezi stammered, fishing in her bag for her handkerchief. 'I've never been . . .'

'Everybody has been to Paris,' the professor said. He was looking at Flora, curled up in the wicker chair like a kitten. 'I am going away for a while,' he said. 'Tomorrow morning.' 'Where?' Flora asked. 'To Paris.' 'Alone?' 'Yes.' Flora went into her bedroom and locked the door. The professor had left

at dawn without saying goodbye.

'Go home, Rezi,' the professor said without moving. 'Go home, Rezi,' he repeated.

The garden gate closed, creaking, behind her. He rose and stepped to the terrace railing. The moon was high in the sky. Its red glow had turned pale. The professor was cold. The sky, which a few minutes before had looked down on him in a friendly way, now stiffened inimically. The stars sparkled coldly. Time moved with a sudden lurch in the misty jungle of the Milky Way. It's falling, the professor thought; the whole damn thing is falling down on me . . .

He heard cars stop in front of the villa. Then he sat down on the edge of his bed and lit a cigarette. The lights went on in the downstairs hall but he didn't move. He remembered Feldheimer's words in the operating room and a strange taste of relief filled his throat.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Rezi sat stiffly upright on the white bench at the bottom of the slightly sloping garden. Facing her, the light vibrated in living, luminous spots on the lowered shutters and closed windows of the villa. Rezi's glance followed the curving garden path as it cut the wide lawn in two, climbed up the low steps leading to the front door and disappeared under the vine-covered walls. After she had regained consciousness and stolen out into the sunshine again, she had tried to revive her yearning for the villa which, alternating with revulsion, had tormented her for three days—but in vain. She felt neither tense nor relieved, neither excited nor happy. The colorless indifference that had driven her from Eszter's room yielded to an irritation that pricked her more and more sharply every time the old man leaning against the tree opened his mouth. He would burst out, then fall silent, panting asthmatically as if the steep slope of the story were too much for him. 'At three o'clock in the morning,' he said and coughed, 'just imagine . . .' His white mustache trembled in the light flickering through the branches. 'At three o'clock in the morning . . .' the old man repeated, as if with these six plain words he were trying to sum up or perpetuate the extraordinary nature of that night.

'I say to Eszter: Mother, the front-door bell, can't you hear,

but she says you're dreaming, old man, drink a glass of water. I reach for the glass that always stands on the bedside table, when it rings again...' Rezi, who had listened to the same story four times in the past thirty minutes and knew exactly what came next (... they even went into the poor dead lady's room, just think of it...), felt an almost solid core of anger thickening in her. Aimless at first, it turned more and more purposefully toward the old man.

'I go up the stairs ... behind me a tall, fair-haired ... "Doctor Antal Karolinszky?" the man asked. "State Security." The professor was sitting in his navy-blue pajamas, smoking. "Go back to bed, Ferenc, leave the rest to ..." The tall man interrupted. "You stay here. We're searching the house." At four-thirty in the morning the tall one turned to the professor. "Come with us." The professor got into the car without saying a word. Can you imagine, Miss Rezi ...'

The girl jumped from the bench, her face on fire. The old man, misinterpreting Rezi's agitation, took a few uncertain steps toward her, still muttering. 'Stop!' she screamed. 'Stop, or else ...' She raised her arms in fury; her voice thinned to a screech. The old man's eyes shone now with fear and anxiety. 'Miss Rezi, for heaven's sake ...' He tried to back away, but the trunk of the lime tree cut off his line of escape. Before his very nose hovered a frightening, unknown face, bloated with hatred. Then his eyes filled with hatred too and he shook all over. They stared at each other silently, with stubborn cruelty, like the dead. Rezi stepped back. He is tiny, she thought, as small as a worm. Do worms have feelings? I should have hit him. How does it feel to hit someone? She was overwhelmed by a bitter feeling of frustration and curiosity.

'Jozsef ...' a thin voice called, 'what are you doing there, Jozsef?' Aunt Eszter stood on a small rough-stone terrace at the corner of the villa. She put a shopping basket cautiously down at her feet. 'Why don't you answer, Jozsef? Have you lost your voice?'

'Go to hell,' the old man said. The old woman peered at them uncertainly. At last she pulled the black knitted jacket closer around herself, stepped carefully down the small steps and walked toward them.

'I'm going,' Rezi said suddenly.

'Don't go,' the old woman answered. 'Better lie down again for a while.'

'You're scared, aren't you?' Jozsef Ferenc asked his wife. 'It's easy to make dumplings, but a search at three o'clock in

the morning! Answer that if you can. They sealed the house. Answer that one! The comrades came and said I wouldn't get into trouble. It's the caretaker's job to watch the house. It's all in the contract.' He fell silent, a thin smile under his white mustache.

Rezi walked away slowly. At the gate, Aunt Eszter caught up with her. 'You really want to go?' she asked hopelessly.

'Yes,' Rezi said. She raised her eyes to the crowns of the trees. The foliage was a luminous green.

'Let her go,' Jozsef Ferenc said loudly, 'let her go. What is she waiting for?'

'When will you be back?' the old woman asked in a low voice.

'I don't know,' Rezi said. 'Tomorrow, or the day after, or ...' She didn't finish.

'The day after tomorrow, perhaps?'

'Perhaps the day after tomorrow,' Rezi agreed.

'Shall I make you plum dumplings?'

'Don't make her anything,' Jozsef Ferenc said, his voice hostile. 'She always has to be cooking something, this one.'

'No,' said Rezi, 'don't prepare anything.'

At the street corner she looked back. The wind lay low among the bushes. The invincible fortress of the Karolinszky villa rose once more out of the thicket of fresh green foliage, then suddenly, with a dry crash, it collapsed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Winter had been so long that year, so cold, so ruthless that even the oldest people couldn't remember one to match it. Early October brought none of the mild, fruitful season that graced other years. A cold rain poured down endlessly. Mud lay thick on the ground. Then one morning the clouds dispersed, the sky cleared. But the luminous heights radiated no warmth: the sparkling, flinty, ice-cold arch of the sky closed in on its own blue perfection. Then came the snow. Drifts blocked the roads. There was hardly any coal in the towns. People wrapped themselves in layers of clothes and shivered. Hard frost set in.

Winter had lasted for many months.

And spring had come just like winter, suddenly, without transition, from one day to the next, with a crazy brilliance. It wasn't really spring, it was summer—a wild, cheap, enticing blaze that started with a gentle glow in the morning but by noon had tricked you into shedding your jacket.

Some considered this phenomenon a freak that would disappear the way it had come, suddenly, without transition, and thus give transition a second chance. Others advanced a scientifically more ambitious hypothesis, claiming that it was connected with the slow but inevitable distortion of the ecliptic. Still others again talked of God's wrath against sinful mankind. More and more people shared the opinion that it was a consequence of the constantly multiplying nuclear explosions. Some interpreted the curious climatic behavior as indicating that the earth was on the brink of a new ice age. According to others, it was the harbinger of Doomsday.

These and similar thoughts chased through the mind of Lautenburg, who felt as if this new whimsicality were just one more assault on his defenselessness. He gasped for breath in the heavy air. He paced up and down in his spacious office whose rotting oak paneling he loved with a deep, sentimental love, as if it conjured up memories of a secure past which he had never had but liked to imagine. Sometimes he would even forget Mrs. Mikecz, sitting near his desk, ramrod stiff, her dark-blue pleated skirt carefully smoothed over her knees, in a freshly laundered, high-necked silk blouse, holding notebook and pencil in readiness between her short, blunt but carefully tended fingers. Lautenburg felt that Mrs. Mikecz had not failed to note his unusual nervousness. But however hard he tried, he was unable to suppress the strange excitement that dug itself in more and more fixedly behind his pale, thickly lined forehead. He perspired.

'It's warm,' he said in a low voice, wiping his face and neck with his white handkerchief. 'Strange, isn't it?' No sooner had he blurted out this question than he regretted it.

Mrs. Mikecz gave him a searching glance. 'Strange?' the Party Secretary repeated in her flat, deep voice. 'Why should it be strange? It's spring. Soon it will be summer. Why should it be strange, Comrade Lautenburg?' The second time the question was put in more sharply, no doubt of it.

'I don't mean anything,' Lautenburg said and tried to smile. 'Nothing at all. It appeared to me, for a moment, that this heat was rather premature.' He sat down at the desk, troubled.

Instead of dissolving the distorted rigidity of his features, the sickly smile suddenly froze onto his lips. He tilted his head a little to one side and listened. Does she know something? Did someone see me? Report me? Since yesterday?

He was a practical man. All his life he had been afraid of everything outside the mediocre but secure world of reality. Among his earliest memories was the swishing of the cane with which Dr. Alfonz Lubomir, one of his high-school teachers, punished him when—quite innocently—he compared the mystery of the Holy Trinity to a three-crown coin which was three and still one and yet three. Reality was the only existing world for him and a column of figures the only catechism. Figures were Lautenburg's greatest joy; he was excellent at mental arithmetic, could multiply numbers of three or four digits without a moment's thought and, if asked, would multiply even fractions with an obliging smile. The years went by; he opened a shop (first a small delicatessen, later a larger one), married, had children, grew a potbelly and was known in the trade as a first-class businessman, but he never grew tired of playing with figures. This decent, kindly man with a tendency to obesity and tiny hedgehog eyes was at any time ready to forgo social life or rest for the sake of a complicated number puzzle. In the logic of numbers he recognized the logic of his own life. He often said that he saw God as the unknown quantity in a cubic equation—adding, however, that since the last term was missing, the equation would forever remain unresolved. At such times an attractive, mischievous smile would flit innocently across his face and the tiny eyes merge into the cushions of fat rising between the nose and ears.

But in the last few months, thoughts entirely alien to his nature had begun to take shape in his mind. At first he had only shrugged when the conversation among friends or in company turned to the incomprehensible tricks of climate. 'Rubbish, I tell you,' he declared. 'Doomsday? Even my son isn't afraid of the bogeyman any more and he's only five.'

But gradually the calm security of his columns of figures had disintegrated. The best proof of this was when his young son had asked him to play with him in the evening, as usual, and he had ordered the boy from the room with unusual severity. Mrs. Lautenburg, who had watched the scene from the next room, hurried into her husband's room and sat on his lap purring like a kitten, something she hadn't done for years. Lautenburg was moved. This was the excuse he needed: he

was going to visit the witch (his name for the fortuneteller, perhaps in self-defense), not because he was curious about the reason for his behavior, not because the idea interested, excited, bothered, troubled him, but because he wanted to please his wife, who was so keen on it; she deserved it. Never since his childhood had he experienced such relief. Reason and emotion had parted; he swam around happily in this delightful irresponsibility which had lifted him out of the self-imposed discipline of everyday life and into a new world whose misty elusiveness seemed, in a strange way, more reassuring than the square world of figures.

'Born . . .' the witch had asked, 'year, month, day? That's important for the horoscope, you know . . .' Nobody had mentioned a horoscope, Lautenburg thought, looking furtively around in the dimly lit, overcrowded room. On top of the stove, cabbage was boiling and its smell enveloped him. 'You, sir,' the witch said, 'you have rheumatic pains in the small of your back, but in the near future they will improve. Don't let this sudden spell of summer mislead you. Don't let it mislead you. . . .' It will not mislead me, Lautenburg had thought, still ashamed and angry. Aloud he had said, 'How much do I owe you?' He had paid 120 forints for the two of them, but he wasn't sorry. He felt as if, with this money, he was buying back the serene calm of the columns of figures.

This morning he had found out that he had been wrong.

Mrs. Mikecz was still speaking, measuredly, dully, as was her habit. Lautenburg didn't look up at her; he let his head drop heavily forward. If he couldn't flash his usual morning smile at least the bitch shouldn't notice his alarm; she had noticed too much already. Take it easy, he told himself, just take it easy. You're making a mountain out of a molehill.

'Naturally,' he said, bending forward and trying to smile brightly, 'you are absolutely right, my dear Sari. Those sweet peas for Germany should have . . . yes, days ago . . . How right you are . . .' What would happen if once, just once, she didn't deliver her daily Sermon on the Mount? Ten minutes past eight-thirty—you could set your watch by her—she appears at the door, smiles, sits down opposite you on the other side of the desk, smooths down her skirt—who the hell wants to see her knees but she smooths down her skirt anyway—how are you, Comrade Lautenburg, how is the family, have you found a cleaning woman yet—that's how it begins.

Lautenburg looked surreptitiously at his watch. She had

been talking for over three quarters of an hour, but Lautenburg couldn't even guess what she had said. Show your cards, old girl, show your cards; do you think I don't know what all this is leading up to? . . . My dear Sari, you know as well as I do that I had nothing whatsoever to do with this little Rezi Karolinszky; its only . . . Do you believe me? She won't believe it; why should she? She was born never to believe anything I say. Good God, how am I going to get out of this mess? . . . The signs are favorable, the witch said. Her breath smelled of cabbage. In the morning, on his way to the office, he used to play a game. He would enter, give a loud greeting, and Rezi would answer, 'Good morning, Comrade Lautenburg, did you sleep well? What did you dream?' 'I dreamed of a little pig.' That would make them laugh because the little pig was their lucky charm. 'Did you catch it by its tail?' Rezi always asked, breathlessly. 'No' was his usual reply, 'I left it for you.' They would flash warm smiles of mutual understanding, ignoring Aliz Weszelka's disapproving glances.

But Rezi was no longer there. Damn, why in heaven's name did I have to befriend that . . . He despised himself for the sudden blaze of hatred that was beyond his control. Poor little Rezi. It isn't her fault. But is it mine? I have a family, Comrade Holcz, please, my wife is sickly, I have to feed two children, you know what that means, and after all, the simple fact that I befriended that lonely little creature . . . no, I am not trying to excuse what she did. . . . What did she do? . . . She didn't do anything, Comrade Lautenburg; we mete out punishment because our people's democracy demands deeds and consequently those who didn't do anything . . . Is two times two still four? Lautenburg, who had believed the day before that he had brought back the friendly security of his columns of figures for a few miserable forints, suddenly understood that he would never again be able to pull from his body the sharp twin thorns of loneliness and fear; that death occurs not when the heart unexpectedly switches off the flow of blood to the veins and arteries but when the uncertain becomes certain and when the inescapable comes true.

'The plan figures for the past decade . . .' Mrs. Mikecz said suddenly, 'would you get them out for me, Comrade Lautenburg?' Damn you, thought Lautenburg as he bent down to the bottom drawer of his desk, where he kept the plan files. For heaven's sake let's get it over with. But death did not come.

'Here they are, Sari dear,' Lautenburg said, smiling. He could smile. 'Everything is always in its place. In order to find

the documents easily when they are needed, I have developed a method . . .'

'Of course,' said Mrs. Mikecz. 'Of course everything is in its place in your office, Comrade Lautenburg.' She took the paper with the orderly columns of plan figures from Lautenburg's hand, indifferently, purposefully, and threw a glance at it.

In the abnormal smooth silence Lautenburg felt an in-human fury rising from the depths of his instincts, a fury which inundated his entire body with so overwhelming a force that his breath caught in his throat, a red film suffused his eyes and his perspiring, soft palms contracted convulsively. Her neck, Lautenburg thought; let me get hold of her neck! The thin, elongated female neck flopped to one side between his fingers.

'Aren't you feeling well, Comrade Lautenburg?' he heard the familiar, slightly hoarse voice say. Suddenly the mist rose. The murderer straightened up in his chair. Thin rivulets of perspiration ran down his forehead.

'It's nothing,' he whispered. 'Only these rheumatic . . .' Now he knew that his nervous state had not escaped Mrs. Mikecz's notice. Uncle Pista, Rezi said, because when they were alone she always addressed him as Uncle Pista, Mrs. Mikecz said today that I ought to join the Party, my work was satisfactory, my brother is a respected intellectual, she would gladly sponsor me but of course we'd need another sponsor, what do you think, should I . . . ? Suddenly Lautenburg's head cleared. I've got you, he thought, almost shouting it out loud, I've got you, you bitch. Why didn't I think of it before? The quivering of his nerves, which had seemed to be relaying the message of death over their swift network, disappeared in a flash. He spread his arms out obligingly. 'Is there anything else I can do for you, Sari dear, because if there isn't . . .' His sparse brows, which looked so much like graying cat's whiskers, rose to make room for his smile.

Now that the first mighty wave of his joy had ebbed a little he realized that the struggle was by no means over. On the contrary, perhaps it was just beginning. True, the secret he possessed, thanks to Rezi's trust in him, had improved his position—and might improve Rezi's also—but since Mrs. Mikecz had not yet spoken out (she was obviously waiting for the most auspicious moment) Lautenburg decided that he should protect his secret, bury it quickly and deeply. Let her make the first move, and then we'll see. But perhaps I was only imagining things; perhaps it won't even be necessary to . . . No,

that wasn't likely. He had forseen the attack the very moment, three days ago, when the news of Karolinszky's arrest spread like wildfire through the office. So we must wait, Lautenburg thought, and threw Mrs. Mikecz a cautious glance.

The Party Secretary was quietly leafing through her little notebook. 'We'll be through in a minute, Comrade Lautenburg,' she said. 'There's only one thing. Perhaps we should ...'

'Well ... ?' the manager said. 'Well?'

'Don't you think we should send someone out to the warehouse? There have been a number of thefts there lately.' She looked at Lautenburg, obviously baffled by his sudden change of mood.

'An excellent idea, excellent. I shall take steps immediately, my dear. How lucky you reminded me of it. I'd thought of it myself but then it slipped my mind these last few days, you know.' He winked at her, bursting with joy, because he knew that the hint (*these last few days*—wasn't that smart?) had hit the mark. 'We'll teach those thieves where they get off, just leave it to me, Sari dear. Should I send Gortvai?'

'No,' Mrs. Mikecz said, 'Comrade Holcz has just sent for Gortvai. Let's rather——'

'I see,' Lautenburg said though he didn't see anything at all. 'Well, then ...' He thought it better not to ask why Gortvai had been called—besides, he didn't attribute too much importance to the matter; it wouldn't be the first time that Vilma Holcz had picked a file out of her drawer, at random, and then summoned the unlucky person to her office at the Ministry. 'Should we send Alajos Sandor, then?' he asked because he couldn't think of anybody else for the moment. He fidgeted nervously. Again he felt that damp, cold touch on his spine.

The witch raised her head from her notebook. 'Perhaps ...' she said, 'perhaps ... Alajos Sandor.'

From time to time Mrs. Mikecz ran her hand over her forehead as if sweeping away an invisible hair. Her hair, parted in the middle, hung down straight but thick and supple to her shoulders. Whether it was the prematurely sagging skin of her neck, the arched furrows on her brown forehead or the deliberate self-assurance that emanated from her personality, everyone took her for nearer forty than thirty, her real age. She was the kind of woman who never catches a man's eye. Yet she was not ugly; on the contrary, her calm and rigid countenance excluded some sort of strength that weak men often find irresistible. She had piercing eyes, an unusually deep voice, small breasts, hips unexpectedly broad below the narrow waist,

shapely though somewhat thick-ankled legs—altogether she neither attracted nor repulsed men; she simply left them indifferent.

When, some years ago, she had learned that experience did not equal the daydreams of girlhood and that there was no satisfaction to be found in physical passion, it had not been difficult for her to sacrifice herself for society. Once she had done so, her body had petrified—as if the erogenous zones, once so demanding, had understood that under the new system of facts and concepts now emerging they were, in any case, condemned to death. Things that were once desirable however disgusting, vile and yet tempting, sinful but enticing, had no place in this new, changed world because ever since she had come out of the Party school Mrs. Mikecz was certain that she was living in the age of salvation. Whenever she thought of it, her heart contracted with happiness and fear; she rejoiced because at last she understood the meaning of life, because everything that had for years been confusing, stupid, repulsive and abnormal now assumed an unequivocal and unambiguous shape. At the same time, she was afraid.

She was afraid because she knew that the Party with which she had identified herself was so unapproachably sublime, so infallibly omniscient, that sooner or later her own unworthiness must be exposed. The trouble was that she was not perfect. The fact that others around her were not perfect either was no comfort; on the contrary, it increased her demands upon herself. Through the most rigorous self-discipline she sought to become like those who, in her eyes, had reached the highest peak of human evolution: unconditional hatred of the enemy and unconditional love of the people.

Unflagging perseverance, ceaseless readiness to help, the conscious subordination of individual interest to that of the community, untiring vigilance (that is, the watching for and unmasking of enemies) gradually filled her soul. She no longer feared, or at least not with the same quavering fear as before, that her unworthiness and ignorance might bring about her downfall. She walked along corridors and entered offices with her back straight, her head high, her glance open and penetrating. She argued, expressed opinions, passed resolutions and made decisions. By now, nothing could disturb her absolute and perfect happiness, which, though she never admitted it even to herself, was a permanently simmering mixture of daily, tenacious struggle for the Party's approval and daily, tenacious fear that this approval would be withheld. The past,

which she had vanquished with a pure effort of will, faded quickly and gave way to the brilliant future, as clear, as tangible as if it had already come true. Mrs. Mikecz lived in that future with a strange delight and devotion in her heart. It was a premature ecstasy, an orgasm of identification.

Mrs. Mikecz looked at Lautenburg. The manager's brows quivered almost imperceptibly in the shaft of brilliant sunshine. There's something wrong here, thought Mrs. Mikecz. Once again she felt that light, intoxicating excitement, as if she had drunk a glass of strong wine. She was glad of it. This quickening of the senses had been overpowering her several times a day lately. Because of a strange lack of smoothness in the functioning of the enterprise, she had had to pay greater attention to those who, as she believed or at least presumed, were purposefully and deliberately impeding production. She no longer merely suspected. She knew with absolute certainty that the enemy was lurking in the office ready to pounce and she also knew who that enemy was, long before the organs of the State Security Organization could lay their hands on him. Thus she was never surprised when the blow fell; she was surprised only when, for some mysterious reason, it was delayed or failed to fall. It always seemed almost impossible that she, who knew this office better than anyone else, could be mistaken. But she accepted the Party's judgment without argument, although her entire being continued to vibrate with the deep conviction that the truth, her truth, would sooner or later prevail and the person she considered an enemy or a tool of the enemy would in due course be arrested.

Sometimes, when everyone had gone home and the silence of the night descended on the offices and corridors, she would switch on her desk light, open her carefully locked safe, take out her files, put them on the desk before her and study their contents over and over again. What a treasure trove those files were! They contained short handwritten autobiographies in alphabetical order. Then came the reports from janitors, waiters, former colleagues, State Security investigators, taxi drivers, usherettes, heads of personnel departments, subordinates, discharged and long since imprisoned superiors. Records of statements made during the war and afterward.... The Germans will win.... The British, my friend, will not allow the Russians to take over Hungary! ... I'm tired of these May Day demonstrations, darling.... You can't get eggs; eggs have disappeared again.... My husband says the whole thing won't last long now.... Radio Free Europe said last night that the

Americans will demand . . . Everyone steals in this country, but do you know who steals the most? . . . Well, old chap, I went to see that Soviet film our Party Secretary praised with such enthusiasm, and idiotic is an understatement. . . . If you value your job, shut your mouth when that skinny Aliz comes into the room. . . . Also in the files was information on family quarrels, abortions, imminent divorces, christenings. The list of churchgoers. Who prayed. Who went to Communion. Who went to confession. Reports on Party members and non-members. On minors. On pensioners. On the healthy. On the sick. On the dead.

It was all deeply absorbing.

Yet Mrs. Mikecz preferred real life to the rustling heaps of papers. She would often summon her colleagues to her office and involve them in a pleasant, intimate conversation so that they would appreciate her sense of justice but at the same time be impressed by her unflinching Party loyalty, her inflexibility. At other times she would put on her coat, wrap her head in the inevitable woolen scarf and set out visiting. She was very careful to drop in on her colleagues unexpectedly, usually in the early evening. It was then that their private lives were most revealing. She loved these surprises. The embarrassed fidgeting of the family around the dinner table. The compulsive politeness: do eat something, dear Comrade Mikecz. . . . Thank you, she would say, don't let me disturb you, I was just passing by. She never accepted anything and she never failed to bring the children a bag of fruit drops or tiny chocolate bars wrapped in tinfoil. That's awfully kind of you, the colleague's wife would say, blushing. It's nothing, she would reply, delighted with the numb silence. Charming place you have, she would then say, looking around calmly with unconcealed interest. And all these books! She picked up one of them. It's an old book, a very old one, the colleague's wife stammered; haven't you heard of it—*Gone with the Wind*? No, I don't know it, she said. She walked over to the radio. Do you like music, Comrades? Very much, the colleague said. He is smoking his third cigarette since I came, she thought. He's not too happy to see me. Why not? I wonder. Why not? . . .

And so it went. She always found something. Another time—it was Sunday morning—rain was falling in torrents. She was crossing Maria-Terese Square, walking in slush that bespattered her stockings. Shreds of mist hung over the bare branches. A few old women stood idly at the entrance of the church. One of them seemed familiar. Yes. It was the old maid

from the storage plant. Her watery eyes, narrow, ungainly shoulders and the tired head held up with an effort by the thin bird's neck had immediately displeased Mrs. Mikecz. The old maid was staring at the ground. The raindrops ran slowly down her crumpled face. Mrs Mikecz waited awhile, but the old maid didn't enter the church. She just stood there in the rain like a drenched, gray sparrow. Mrs. Mikecz shivered. Tomorrow I shall visit her, she thought. On the old maid's bed lay the cloak and bonnet of the dissolved Carmelite Order. She made sure that the nun left the damp, yellow building of the packing house the same day and that she could never again try to subvert any other enterprise. She had forgotten the woman's name. But in her office, late at night, she often remembered the taste of satisfaction. She would switch off the light and stretch contentedly. The silence which would suddenly flood every corner of the office reminded her of the pleasant, exciting fatigue that tingled in her body. She sat for a long time, motionless, her eyes open, lord and master of the windows creaking in the light wind, the empty desks, chairs and filing cabinets.

Now, however, as she listened to Lautenburg's rapid, unhealthy breathing, she felt her anxiety return. It's up to me to put the pieces together, she thought in alarm. But the pieces fell into place of their own accord. Karolinszky had been arrested. His sister had disappeared. Everyone knew that there was only one person Lautenburg really liked at the office, and that was Rezi Karolinszky. Their apparently innocent, ordinary human relationship disclosed another facet in the blinding light of Karolinszky's arrest. I should have known that was coming, she thought desperately. But how? She had seen Karolinszky only once in her life, in the neon-lit corridor of the Cold Valley Road Hospital, as he was coming out of surgery. He had gone right by her, both hands deep in the pockets of his white coat, his head bent, his steps quick. She had followed him with her eyes, surprised and strangely yearning. Karolinszky's hostile indifference ran through her like a strong electric current. What a man! she thought listlessly. But Rezi . . . And I was the one who offered her Party membership. I offered it to her on a silver platter! She stared at Lautenburg again. Did he know? Had Rezi told him? There's no proof. I'll deny it. But who will believe me? In the Party committee I will say that I've been suspicious for a long time, but . . . 'You see, Comrade Mikecz, it's all your fault.' The District Party Secretary's low voice, controlled as usual, contained threat. 'You

are not sufficiently vigilant. You lock your desk, you seal your safe and still, the enemy . . . ' I've made a mistake, Mrs. Mikecz thought humbly. I failed to bear in mind that because of their backgrounds both Lautenburg and Rezi are enemies and thus their friendship can have no meaning other than an alliance against the working class. . . . Fear of the Party, worse than her fear of death, caught her throat. Punishment seemed unavoidable. And the Party's cruel truth seemed even more blinding than usual. Mrs. Mikecz felt helpless.

Lautenburg leafed impatiently through the papers lying on his desk, but his attention wandered away from the notes relating to Far Eastern exports although he knew that the Ministry expected an answer to their questions within three days. The Chinese comrades were impatient for their Hungarian carrots. Let them wait, Lautenburg thought distractedly. If they had managed without Hungarian carrots for five thousand years, a few more weeks . . . His dour absent-mindedness was again tainted with fear. Everything that had seemed so effective and certain only half an hour earlier grew dim and blurred. She'll deny it, Lautenburg thought, of course she'll deny it. There are no witnesses. Nobody will believe Rezi. Nobody will believe me, either. Why should they?

He stole a glance at the woman who was bent over her notebook, her forehead creased. If once, only once, for heaven's sake, he could see beyond that low, narrow forehead, if he only knew what was going on in the convolutions of that brain . . . But in the cold vacuum left between his retreating assurance and his returning fear, he did know. It was he, Istvan Lautenburg of the Hungarian People's Fruit and Vegetable Canning Authority, age fifty-one, it was he, flashing and fading through Mrs. Mikecz's mind. Lautenburg's face broke into a tortured grin. Life, he thought, is nothing but a preliminary measure against arrest. Arrest is inevitable. Much in life was inevitable. Old age, illness, death were coming toward him slowly and inevitably, whether he liked it or not. All this was natural, just in its injustice, disquieting but also reassuring, because it relieved him of the necessity to struggle. But there was something unnaturally evil in the inevitable when it sprang from society instead of nature, when it threatened sudden annihilation day after day, week after week, year after year, ever more ruthlessly. The horror of inevitable life rather than inevitable death.

Lautenburg gave up hope.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A brown Pobieda sedan was waiting for Gortvai at the appointed place. The driver, a squat young man with a crew-cut and a long scar on his left cheek, nodded coolly. 'The back seat, please, Comrade,' he said in a peremptory tone.

They drove past the venerable Academy of Sciences, then turned onto the Chain Bridge and crossed to the Buda side of the Danube. Gortvai frowned. The personnel branch had been on the Pest side; he had been there just two weeks ago. Well, they must have moved in the meantime. But why hadn't Vilma Holcz told him?

'Could you tell me where we're going, Comrade?' he asked tartly.

'You'll see,' the driver answered indifferently.

Gortvai leaned back in the seat. He had grown accustomed to sudden twists in his life, the constant uncertainty; in fact, he had almost become a sort of specialist on patterns in what he called the surprise society. The mystery that threw a certain shadow on his life now did not necessarily spell grief or peril. We'll see, he mused. But I wish I knew the reason for these curtains on the window. Are they to prevent people from seeing me, or me from seeing them?

The car sped past villas, budding gardens, white-candle chestnuts, pink-skirted peach trees, fragrant lilacs. On the steep winding streets of Liberty Hill, young matrons strolled behind baby carriages. A blond dumpling child in a cherry-colored smock stood at a gate. A crane crossed the sky. At a corner where men were laying asphalt, acrid fumes mixed with the flood-scent of lilacs. From behind a fence a bright-colored ball rolled out. Somewhere a radio blared the news.

The car rolled to a stop.

With its green shutters closed, its plaster walls yellowed by time and neglect, the two-story villa looked forlorn in the big, unkempt garden. It stood there amidst abandoned flower beds and entangled grape arbors, a weather vane squeaking weirdly on its roof next to an ultramodern antenna complex. The whole structure seemed to shiver in the bright sunlight. Standing in the doorway, a short smooth-shaven young man wearing a brown suit waved Gortvai in with a smile. The door swung shut behind them.

The man escorted him to a richly furnished room with windows draped in chintz curtains. Beyond them, aged chestnut

trees stretched their fresh green limbs. 'Just a few minutes, please, colleague Gortvai,' said the smooth-shaven man in an odd, strained voice. 'Take a seat.' He stepped to the low table and held out a shiny silver cigarette box. 'Do you smoke?' Gortvai, who smoked only now and then, selected what looked to him like a mild cigarette. The lighter's pale-blue flame danced under his nose, he puffed, and then suddenly he was alone in the room.

In that instant, silence pounced. The sweetness of life that had flowed through him in the car was switched off and replaced by the rush of fear. Gortvai had no idea where he was. This was obviously not the Ministry's personnel branch.

The gleam of betrayal hovered distantly on the horizon. He began pacing. Anyway, there's nothing between us. I can assure you, Comrades, that as regards Socialism, I have always, with all my strength . . . Rezi Karolinszky? As Comrade Holcz can testify, I love Russian films, I see all of them, and we simply met in the lobby. . . . Could it be some extended trip abroad? (Pressed button: I was born at Puspokladany . . . in my early youth I came to know the oppressed Lowlands proletariat. . . .) Or could they have dug up that business with the Solti woman? She was a deputy minister's wife; he'd met her by chance at the secretariat. Nylons, Arpège, silver nail polish—Solti had brought them to her from Paris. He had left the next day for Tirana. Wasn't worth it, though—beneath the Arpège a coat of Elizabeth Arden make-up, then just wrinkles and crow's-feet. He got home the next morning; a nice little scandal. But at worst they'll kick me out. Comrade, Socialist morals . . . Dear old Vilma Holcz, it's not true that I can't stand her. I like her. Just today I was saying to Alajos Sandor . . .

The sweat poured from him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Aliz Weszelka could not catch a single word. She had stopped at the door, then brought in the coffee things as slowly as she could (first the saucers, then the cups, then the spoons, then the sugar), moving as cautiously as if the cheap flowered dishes were dearer than life. But inside there was only silence.

Lautenburg rustled and poked among his papers and dismissed her with an icy look. Aliz looked appealingly toward Mrs. Mikecz, but she too only bent over her steno pad, acting oblivious. Like a beaten dog, Aliz finally slunk from the room.

All Aliz wanted was to be the first to hear any news. She lived to know yesterday what others would only know tomorrow. Ever since Mrs. Mikecz had befriended her, this thin, nervous creature had been filled with life. She cared little about the price she had to pay, experience having taught her that betrayal itself offered a kind of defense against being betrayed and that life was bearable only to the degree that she could make it unbearable for others. Since her slyness was surpassed only by her fear of retribution, she took care to stay within bounds, serving anyone she thought could save her from the wrath of others. She disgusted her colleagues, but beneath that disgust lay their own fear, forestalling revolt. True, when she stepped into a room, a wary silence fell; but when she was alone in the office they came to her, pumped her, asked her advice and help. She always knew something others didn't. Tomorrow Mrs. Mikecz would leave for the country. On Wednesday Lautenburg was to appear at the Ministry. The Steering Committee had named Gortvai for a commendation. Vilma Holcz would head the Authority's delegation to the Soviet Union. No one knew how carefully she hoarded her news. There were items she divulged to only one or two people; others she broadcast; still others she kept to herself. There was a right time for everything.

Aliz, too, soon acquired followers whom she could reward. To some of them she entrusted only little details; to others, nothing at all, no matter how they begged. She became quite adept at this game; Mrs. Mikecz had praised her cleverness more than once. The realization that she was in a position to meddle in other people's lives was intoxicating after a lifetime of being subject to other peoples meddling. She enjoyed herself thoroughly.

But now she didn't feel that way. She knew Lautenburg loathed her (no matter how hard he tried to hide it), especially now that his favorite, Rezi, was in such trouble. Still, even he sometimes had to use her. This morning you even had me make your coffee, she thought; and you'll come down still lower from your perch. In Lautenburg's raw glance of dismissal she sensed with sure instinct not just his hatred but also his helplessness. I'll speak to Vili Racz today, she thought. Stirring her coffee, Aliz also considered how she could even

the score with Mrs. Mikecz for ignoring her just now; sooner or later, the time would come for that too.

The phone rang. 'That you, Lizochka? What did you find out? What's going on?' Aliz tensed. Alajos Sandor was one of the few people she still feared: unreasonably and inexplicably. She never could look him full in the face for more than an instant. 'Can't you hear me, dear?'

The voice seemed less urgent and menacing. 'Yes,' she breathed into the mouthpiece. The delightful anticipation of revenge vanished and abject humility took its place. She knew the engineer detested her, but he accepted her on her own terms and sought neither to exploit nor convert. He just looked through her with bored quiet disdain. Whenever he entered the room or called her on the phone, Aliz' nerve fled.

'Speak up, for God's sake' came his impatient voice now. 'What were they saying?'

'Not a thing,' she said, groaning.

Sandor snorted. 'Don't tell me they said nothing, my pet, don't give me that. Invent something! If you like I'll hang up and give you time to think. Sharpen your wits, make notes, call your father for advice, just don't tell me——'

'I ... I swear to you, Alajos,' she blurted. 'I swear they didn't say a word.'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Alone in the office since Gortvai swayed out the door like a sleepwalker, the young engineer slammed down the receiver angrily. They had said nothing! He sensed that for once Aliz Weszelka wasn't lying. Her silly wail echoed the fright of a servant who had muffed an errand. Miserable creature. So they clammed up when you stepped in, you misbegotten attempt at a spy. How like Mrs. Mikecz, too, recruiting such types—good God! Yesterday afternoon she'd called him to the Party office. 'Have a seat, Comrade Sandor. Cigarette?' She had pushed a polished wooden cigarette box at him, stuffed with cheap cigarettes. On its lid a thin silver plate said: *To Mrs. Josef Mikecz for effective work in the Congress elections, the District ...* 'Comrade Sandor,' said Mrs. Mikecz, pinning an indulgent smile on the tip of her nose, 'the thing is, Comrade

Sandor, it is essential that you address tomorrow's membership meeting. We've invited non-Party members too, so you see how important . . . 'I see,' Sandor had said. 'Of course only if you care to,' Mrs. Mikecz added. 'Of course,' said the engineer. 'What am I supposed to say tomorrow?' Mrs. Mikecz glared at him. 'How can you ask such a thing?' she parried, shaking her head as if embarrassed for him. 'You'll say what you please. Our Party never prescribes. Everyone speaks his mind. But if you'll take some comradely advice . . . ' 'Sure,' said Sandor, 'absolutely.' 'Then I would propose that for the sake of the non-members, you speak of the New Man, the everyday hero who lives for Socialism, for the Party, for peace. You understand, I'm sure, without my spelling it out.' 'Why, of course,' said Sandor. 'The New Man. Of course.'

How lucky there is a New Man, or what would I have to talk about? Sandor thought while he paced his cagelike room. The third step knocked him against the wall, but he didn't even feel like swearing. 'You talk another language,' he could hear his father saying. The old railroad engineer leaned against the fence and carefully rolled a cigarette. 'We've grown far apart, son. What's happened to you?' It was a Saturday afternoon, already turning cool. From above the garden, a faint pink light filtered down. Little Dani was digging by a rosebush and grunted with delight as he reached a root. 'Who are your friends? Whose influence have you come under?' The old engineer's stubbled bony face was pale, his voice filled with sadness. 'Maybe you still think that the counts, bishops and bourgeoisie still run our country?' 'No,' Sandor replied softly, watching the cloud that hovered over the Danube like a great bird. 'No, Chief, not that.' He had always addressed his father that way, like a fireman to the engineer. 'Well then?' A train rattled past the garden, spewing sparks. 'The Szob express,' said the old man, glancing at his double-lidded gold watch. 'Thirty minutes late again. Well?' Sandor kept silent, reluctant to prolong the useless argument that had been going on for many months. He looked at the tired old man struggling with his cigarette, which kept flickering out because of the damp tobacco. The roar of the train faded away. The sparks died. Black soot flakes floated in the air. 'So now you can't answer me, child? The cabinet ministers, the generals, the plant bosses, all those men working away at the shop bench a few years ago and you think they don't represent the workers? And what about you? While I was still riding the engine twelve hours a

day, the Party already had you in the university, made you an engineer, gave you a job. You forget that for thirty years your father belonged to the Party that you sneer at for betraying the...' Angrily he tossed away the cigarette. The damp stub fell among the blades of grass peeping from beneath the fence. You're not to blame for that, Sandor wanted to say, but he held it back. 'My son,' his father continued, stretching out his arms and talking to himself by now, 'my only son, whom I raised to serve the cause unselfishly, honorably ... Now he claims it's all lies. They've cheated the workers, the peasants—me too. Socialism to him is just hot air. The dictatorship of the proletariat that his father was wounded for in 1919 and tortured for in 1940 ...' He rummaged in his pants pocket for a fresh cigarette. Sandor turned away abruptly and went in to Anna, who had been standing at the window watching her sputtering father-in-law. 'It's nothing,' he said and embraced his wife. 'The usual sermon ... poor old man.' For a long while his father had stood by the fence in the swiftly falling dusk, alone.

Sandor's head whirled. Nothing pained him more than impotence. As he paced from wall to wall, he was suddenly struck by his own hopelessness. Above the skylight gleamed a square of light, so illusively serene that for a long moment Sandor couldn't take his eyes off it. Poor Chief, he thought, tossing in bed night after night, heart-broken. Did I fail him? Or did he fail me, perhaps? 'On the double,' said his father, 'we're late.' The narrow street was muddy, bleak, dark. The boy's heart pounded with fear. In the yellow light of the swaying street lamps he glanced wonderingly at his father's lean, expressionless face and snatched his breath in quick gasps. Far off, a train rumbled, spraying sparks like stars in the unreachable distance. His father stopped, raised his head; then, as if the train whistle were a clock, he quickened his steps even more. They crossed a yard slick with mud. In the shed, at a rickety table by the dim light of a railway lantern, five silent men sat on wooden benches. Their big knuckly fingers twisted coal-dusted caps. Four of them the boy had never seen before. The fifth was a tall, bent, walrus-mustached man, the fireman on his father's engine, whom he'd met about six months earlier in the roundhouse.

What was left of these men now? A scar over the eyebrow, a winey stub nose, the drowsy blink of swollen eyes, a gap-toothed jaw. Was that all? Only that to show for their zeal, despair and hope? That much and no more? The walrus-

mustached fireman was hanged in the second month of the war. We have failed ourselves, thought the engineer, but without self-pity, for he felt that disenchantment contained not only the pain of self-confrontation but also the chill joy of freedom. We have all failed ourselves, Chief. Still, perhaps this is better. He stopped his pacing and sat down at his desk to continue his brooding.

After a while Sandor felt that he was being watched. He turned his head and there standing in the doorway was Freddy Nagy, a clerk in the international shipping division. He was a squat, ruddy man of about fifty-five, wearing a blue shirt and an elegantly tailored gray-checked suit, now rather threadbare. There were black elbow guards on the sleeves and his tie was meticulously held to his shirt by a thin gold glasp. Its knot was in perfect place despite the sweltering heat. On his fleshy cucumber nose sat a pince-nez; beneath the nose ran a neatly clipped dark-brown mustache. He clasped his hands clerically over a slight paunch, and the shaggy puff on his left hand was already graying in contrast to the solid brown of the hair on his head. From behind the pince-nez shone shrewd, greenish-brown eyes. They were inquisitive and a bit annoyed. But the man must have sensed the grim reason for Sandor's inattention; he remained discreetly in the doorway. 'For God's sake, Freddy, why didn't you say something?' Sandor snapped, feeling like a boy caught playing hooky. He reached for Gortvai's vacant chair and invited the old man to sit. But instead old Freddy crossed to the window and looked out at the light, his back toward Sandor. Sandor caught the pleasing scent of lavender and smiled.

'What do you plan to do?' came Nagy's deep voice.

'I don't know what you mean,' said Sandor, glad they weren't face to face.

'You don't understand?' asked the other.

'No, would you explain?'

Freddy Nagy wheeled on him, the playful gleam gone from his eye. 'Forget it,' he said then, moving toward the door.

'Wait,' said Alajos Sandor thickly, 'wait a minute.'

The old man stopped near the other desk. 'So you do understand?' His tone was more resigned than offensive.

'Yes, I think so.' Two red blotches of embarrassment formed above his light-blond eyebrows. Nagy pretended not to notice. 'Please sit down. Please,' said Sandor.

The old man sat down, legs crossed, and wiped his pince-nez. His snowy cambric handkerchief exuded a gay lavender

scent. 'I thought you were playing games with me. You know, you're the only Red in this whole damn setup who has a heart, the only one a man can talk to straight. The others have even forgotten their mother tongue. What do you intend to do?'

'What *can* be done?' asked Sandor after a pause.

Nagy turned up the tips of his shoes—old shoes, a good pair, custom-made. 'That's for you to work out,' he said. 'Where's Gortvai?'

'They summoned him. Vilma Holcz.' Again he felt hatred bubbling up from deep inside him.

'A bad sign,' said the old man. 'What did she want?'

'How should I know?' Sandor snapped. 'Do you think she keeps me posted? The hell with the whole mess.'

'That won't set things straight. . . . Have you heard anything about poor Rezi?'

'Nothing. Haven't seen her in four days.' Sandor passed a hand over his moist brow. 'Could she have been . . .'

'No,' said the other firmly. 'For once you've misguessed. It happens. They didn't arrest her, at least not yet.'

'How do you know?'

'I know,' replied the old man a bit officiously and straightened the flawless knot in his tie. 'I heard it from a fish in the Danube.' He took off the pince-nez and his eyes gleamed, childlike. 'Where do you think I heard it? Where you could have, too.' His tone was edged with mild reproach. 'I went to her home. The janitor says that she stayed in her apartment for three days. Then this morning, early, she hurried out.' The pince-nez was back on the cucumber nose. 'Didn't you think of going there?'

Sandor again flushed to the roots of his hair. Ever since Karolinszky's arrest, he'd been wanting to visit Rezi. But he never did. Why? There was that morning conference in the produce branch. In the afternoon he had to pick up Dani from kindergarten. Then they had called him to the Ministry. True, he'd finished early; he could have run over to see her then, but on the way he thought that . . . He was suddenly shocked by his own cowardice. Since he had never in his life been a coward—not out of pride but love for life—he saw now that his paralysis was nothing less than the first mocking sign of death at work in his system, slowly eating away his last refuge: self-respect. He sprang off his chair and swept the papers from his desk into the trash basket.

'Are you crazy?' Nagy asked.

'Pretty nearly,' Sandor said, still not able to look the other

man in the eye. 'Let me be, Freddy. Go away. I want to be alone now.'

'Certainly,' said the old man but he did not budge. 'You were afraid. And well you might be! Do you think I wasn't? Show me one man in this country of ours who isn't afraid. That's no sin. Everyone is afraid. But you can get used to fear, take my word for it. In fact, my kind of expropriated-expropriator often feels that life without fear isn't really life at all. It's a bit harder for you, I know. You're a novice at it; I'm a past master. But this too changes with time. Fear can be subdivided like a plot of ground. I'm an old real-estate man, you know. My former colleagues, whom I see now and then over an espresso, can understand this. Something is sold every day—if without profit, then at least without loss. So I break even. A man can gloat over this kind of deal as if he had sold Mount Gellert to the Soviets. Do you understand what I mean?'

Sandor did not reply. The old man went over to the trash basket and looked down at the crumpled sheets. 'What is it?'

'My speech . . . There's a membership meeting tomorrow.'

'I know. And why did you throw it away?'

Sandor leaned forward across his desk. 'Do you really think I'd still have the nerve . . .?'

'And did you have the nerve before I came?'

Sandor noticed tiny beads of sweat glistening above the mustache. He broke out laughing in spite of himself. 'In case you didn't know, I'm still a member of the Party that deals with relics like you.'

'I am aware of that,' Nagy said simply. 'That's why I venture to ask the reason for this outburst of moral indignation. Haven't you always run with the pack? You're a dog too, my boy, just a more decent dog than most. Would this be the right time to stop?' He broke off as if suddenly exhausted.

For a while Sandor looked at the old man who stood there stiffly, black elbow guards glistening. Two years ago he would have hit anybody who talked to him like that. But now his answer was silence. He's right, Sandor thought; what could I say in my speech? That this isn't the way I thought things would be? That this isn't what my father's fireman had died for? Or that the ideal (oh, yes, the ideal) was fine, true, noble, splendid, and the fault lay in those who . . . Cliché—a stinking cliché. What to do? And if I kill the bitch? The horror would not be their hanging me. Never before had he felt so acutely the dank nausea of senselessness, welling not from any dread of murder but from the perception that to kill Mrs. Mikecz

would change nothing; that his deed, however brave and reckless, would be nothing but empty heroics and only strengthen everything that he hated. The woman who, in life, was only the moldy symbol of a horror looming behind her would, in death, solidify it as if she were mortared into the walls of Deva Fortress.

Mrs. Mikacz' yellow-brown face loomed up, spastic-like, then faded fast from view. 'What should I do?' Sandor asked hoarsely, head bowed.

'Speak to Mrs. Mikecz,' said the old man quickly. 'Speak to Vili Racz. Or Lautenburg. Or the district committee. Anyone. Even the blind can see that Mrs. Mikecz is cooking up something. What it is, the devil only knows. But I do know that if she strikes it won't be just against Rezi Karolinszky but against others too. Come on, do I have to give you a map of Mrs. Mikecz's brain? Talk to them. Pump them. They listen to you. You're a Communist, son, and from the workers' cadre, with a record of underground activity to boot . . . Are you listening?'

Sandor leaned back in the chair and shut his eyes. He had known for a long time that Mrs. Mikecz was suspicious of him; you didn't have to be particularly alert to note her mistrustful, exasperated glance whenever he stepped into the Party office, or when they met in the hall. She senses that I detest her, he thought, relieved. The knowledge that he had aroused Mrs. Mikecz' hostility was pleasant, reassuring, a fixed point in the storm she was brewing. 'Uncle Freddy,' he finally said, 'do you think there's any sense to that? You think they listen to me?'

'Sense!' blazed the old man. 'Nothing makes sense. Is that what you want to fret over now?' He got up. His ruddy round face lengthened, grew strong, resolute, almost menacing. He drew himself up and, as if wielding his favorite silver-headed cane, slashed the air. 'We must know what Mrs. Mikecz is up to. We must know so we can defend ourselves. We must live—don't you see that, for God's sake? How can I make you understand? We must survive!'

Life, Sandor mused. Alone again, he sat down at the desk, his head between clenched fists, perspiring in the thickening heat. What is the meaning of life, Chief? To stoke the engine? To build Socialism? To cook stuffed cabbage? To execute blameless men? To can food? To prepare for membership meetings? Long, long ago, life simply had meaning without there being any need to think about it—a meaning that lay in action which even within limits was limitless, which never

sought a place in the world, being itself the world with all its follies, injustices, joys and griefs. But now the meaning of life comes down to this: I want to help someone who has done nothing but will be condemned. Why? Ask Comrade Mikecz, Chief! She knows; she is the official interpreter of life's meaning. I used to think I knew what life was about and what became of me? I turned into a big talker, like everyone else who knows the meaning of life. Who started this mess? The bristly mustached fireman who hailed the Party, even on the gallows? I loved that man; his eyes were always inflamed from the long night shifts. Ask him about the meaning of life. Who is to blame for my impotence, my cowardice? You? Freddy? Dr. Karolinszky? The four-day-old living corpse? Or perhaps...

He hunched over, hugging the desk top as if the smooth hard wood might offer a haven from this three-headed attack of aloneness, impotence, self-reproach; as if he might vanish and be absorbed within a dense, dead, splintery forest. Then he straightened suddenly as though someone had hit him, kicked the chair from under him, turned, and in a single sweep smashed his fist into the thin pane of the small window.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The morning after the arrest of Dr. Antal Karolinszky, his secretary, Klara, reached her office on the fourth floor of the hospital ten minutes late. Her garter belt had broken while she was dressing. Since it was the only one she had, there was nothing to do but mend it. This simple task, however, seemed hedged with obstacles. First, she couldn't find the needle, then the thread. Nervously she ransacked drawers and finally found them exactly where they should have been: staring at her from the little dressing table in front of the mirror. She threaded the needle frantically and vowed to buy a new garter belt that day.

Naturally she missed her regular bus. Standing at the stop in the thick of faces she had never seen before, she felt a mixture of dismay from the repetitiveness of the scene with that reassuring sense of oneness, of interdependence with other bus riders. She thought of the professor with an odd surge of

sympathy; normally, she felt nothing toward him except fear. But yesterday afternoon, for the first time since he came to the hospital, the professor had left his office a good hour earlier than usual. Klara, coming from the hall, opened the door to his office at the same instant the professor emerged, almost colliding with him. Their eyes locked. She saw the high, furrowed brow, the black eyes flashing through a fringe of jet lashes, the straight narrow nose, the pale, thin lower lip beneath it. Klara recoiled. Karolinszky's face was unchanged; yet, without a single line's distortion, it seemed different—unfamiliar and strange. 'Excuse me,' he had said without moving. When Klara stepped back, he nodded coolly and went down the hall. Klara just stood in the doorway, staring after him, puzzled.

Later she had gone to Zoltan's office on the fifth floor, to work for him awhile. The corridor was deserted except for Dr. Feldheimer, who trudged by with his head down and passed her without even looking up. She somehow had the impression he had just come from Zoltan's office, although again there was no good reason for her feeling.

The work with Zoltan had stalled. After dictating a few constrained phrases he fell silent, then started to walk up and down, lighting cigarette after cigarette. He began to dictate again and again he stopped. 'The hell with it,' he said softly. 'I can't concentrate. You'd better go home. I'm not good for anything today.' He leaned over and kissed Klara on the neck: a soft, prim goodbye, untouched by the passion of other times.

Klara rode home and went to bed early but couldn't sleep. From the deep of the night emerged first the straight narrow nose, then the dark eyes, then the pale, thin lower lip, curved inward toward the unseen teeth. After a while the separated details of his face gradually withdrew into the darkness. Then they suddenly stood still and assumed their places upon the face. But again it was not the face she knew.

Now she found the professor's room empty. For once, thought Klara with gay relief, he's late like any ordinary man. And what would he say when he got in? 'I'm sorry, Klara. It happens to anybody. I just felt like staying in bed a few minutes longer.' The sun streamed through the open window. Klara giggled at herself. Of course he wouldn't say a thing. He'd come in, look around, nod, sit down at his desk, read his mail . . . She half leaned out the window and felt a light breeze from the Pasaret blow her red hair gently back and press her freshly ironed silk blouse against her body.

Dr. Wass stood against the doorjamb watching, silent. God, those breasts, he thought and remembered the uncomfortable night Klara had caused him. Yesterday she had rebuffed him again; and he had called that bitch Paulette as soon as he got home, but, as usual, she already had a date. Then he had angrily gulped down half a glass of the Cognac he otherwise hoarded exclusively for lady callers. Afterwards he went down to the Tulip, but his luck failed: the Espresso was strangely deserted. Behind the counter a squat blonde lounged sleepily. She threw the grinning young doctor a disgusted look; and he remembered that when she slept at his place last time he had promised her that sky-blue nylon dress that Grosz was selling cheap. Grosz sold the gifts an aunt regularly sent him from America: nylon hose, orlon sweaters, hairbrushes with colored handles, razor blades wrapped in blue-and-red paper, all at ten per cent below the black-market rates.

'What about my dress?' the blonde hissed under her breath.

'Don't worry,' he said, looking around anxiously. 'I'll pay him tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow,' said the girl testily, 'always tomorrow.'

'Why so flustered? Have I ever lied to you?'

'Oh ...' She sighed and bit her tongue. 'You'd better go sit at a table, and I'll bring you the coffee. But if you don't pay him tomorrow ...'

'Then what?' he asked calmly. 'Are you threatening me, my love?' The girl did not reply. Tomorrow, he thought. What would tomorrow bring? His glance went from the girl to the shabby wall painting behind her. Beneath a lowering sky, a covered wagon lumbered across a vast prairie toward its goal. Ugh! he thought. The befurred coachman with the big mustache, eyes aglow and hair streaming in the wind, cracking his whip frantically at the straining horses. The sun was just setting. Its last tired rays managed to break through the armor of the clouds and fall mournfully on the yellow harness. The painting—which was originally intended (who knows why?) to show the wretchedness of an actor's life in the past century—so revolted the doctor that even the blonde looked up. She poured his coffee into a glass.

Dr. Wass sat down where he always did in the rear of the tiny place. The girl set the black coffee and sugar before him, but he didn't touch it. The once flowering tulips along the wall, livened here and there by stalks of faded lily of the valley, stared back at him through the steam.

No one came in for a long time. Around half past ten, a

faded but freshly peroxidized woman in a purple coat strayed in. When the doctor didn't respond to her encouraging glances, she paid her check and vanished back into the night. Soon he had had enough too. He plodded home along the steep street. Tomorrow, he thought. Tomorrow morning, the phone: please come to room five for an important conference; yes, yes, right away. . . . Zoltan saying thinly: I must inform you, Comrades, that in view of recent occurrences, our Party has ordered an investigation. . . . The district committeeman: In the interest of our brighter tomorrow, dear Comrades . . . Cheery smile, frothing in the lower right corner of the mouth, traumatic twitches. Apologetic applause. How would it be if I launched the 'Let today's tomorrow be brighter than tomorrow's' movement? Kossuth prize, invitation to the opera on November seventh. . . . Once I manage to ingratiate myself into the Party, I'll ask for a transfer. . . . Irma was right: I should have joined long ago in 1945; everyone must join. I need a few new juicy items. I can't palm off Feldheimer again. They already have plenty on him, poor fool—I'd pity him, I swear, if I didn't have to pity myself much more. Maybe I could stir up something in connection with C-17. Nonsense. There's no need for me to stir things; they'll tend to that themselves.

Before going to bed he drank another half tumbler of Cognac and fell asleep thinking of those breasts.

'Where is our beloved leader, dear Klara?' She turned back from the window, startled. Instead of the silent professor here was that assistant chief with his pleasant, slick voice. Her grass-green eyes blinked their disgust.

'He still hasn't come in,' she said suddenly. 'I don't think he has yet. . . .' The pinprick of fear silenced her. She didn't understand why the concern and pity growing in her heart since yesterday had changed in an instant to violent fear. But the wry resignation that flashed across the assistant chief's face warned her of danger.

'Will you try phoning him at home, dear?' asked Dr. Wass. 'Maybe he's ill.'

But the professor did not answer the telephone. Klara glanced, frightened, at the assistant chief. 'Has he disconnected the phone?' she asked faintly. It struck her now that, although she was Karolinszky's secretary, she had never phoned him at home; only the assistant chief or his deputy were allowed to call him, in emergencies.

'Does he do that?' asked the assistant chief, his mouth awry.

'I don't know,' said Klara. 'He must be asleep.'

'I suppose so,' said the assistant chief, pocketing his notebook. 'I've loads of work, angel. If our big chief turns up, let me know. And don't forget me.'

Ten minutes later, at thirteen minutes past nine, everybody knew that the professor had not arrived at his office. Karolinszky, who by his own personality had accustomed his staff never to be surprised at anything, caused the greatest of surprises by his absence. But since they had plenty to keep them busy, they did not appear too concerned. After a caustic quip or two, a shrug, a grimace, everyone thought what he thought, then went about his business; and the hospital, left headless, did not lose its head.

Yet as time passed and the vacuum grew, curiosity and tension increased. Klara's phone rang incessantly. The callers, to mask their anxiety from Klara, and of course from themselves too, did not ask where Karolinszky was, but tried such childish pretexts that even Klara grew exasperated: why couldn't they say they wanted to speak to the professor? The telephone kept ringing and Klara had to admit that the professor's absence had considerably exceeded the bounds of acceptability, or even comprehensibility. The switchboard unmistakably signaled that the hospital had the jitters. Klara's room, where at other times a quarter of an hour could not pass without four or five of the staff dropping in, sniffing for news or gossip, now remained empty. It was as if an invisible quarantine sign had gone up on the white-enameled door, banning the entry of a living soul.

Klara could no longer pretend to be calm; she hung her light-blue cardigan over her shoulders and ran up to see Zoltan, leaving the director's office in the care of the inquisitive old charwoman.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Party Secretary always began his day with a casual visit to one of the hospital services. He would wear an alert, attentive smile to reassure those who might be suspicious or fearful of his motive as he questioned them about their work. The cynics on the staff branded his conscientiousness as political opportunism; the well-intentioned called it a mild form of careerism;

those who knew him closely considered it a true sense of mission as a healer. Though Zoltan was unaware of these varying attitudes, he soon noticed that his colleagues received his every word and deed with that taciturn hostility which prevented him from developing the human contacts he had planned when assigned to the hospital. He was oblivious to the hiss of distrust and at times contempt—the hasty biting off of sentences, the quick change of subject, the sudden silence when he walked by a chatting group or stepped into a room. At such times he pretended not to notice (though he didn't like being taken for a dolt) and would join the group for a few minutes, only to go on brooding later about what he had only half heard. Zoltan never doubted for a moment that the cause of such behavior lay in him. There were times when he'd torment himself for days, reviewing his own actions: whom had he pampered, whom had he handled too brusquely, whom had he slighted, with whom had he been too intimate?

Resolving to correct his faults in the approved spirit of self-criticism, he summoned everyone he had not talked to in a long while and also called the Party directorate, reviving the custom of holding open house to staff workers on a fixed basis, Tuesdays from four to eight P.M. The Party committee—two nurses, a charwoman and an operating-room attendant—was enthusiastic. A notice was posted on the bulletin board. Three or four people showed up. Nothing but complaints—low pay, sick child, no money for clothes. Zoltan tried to explain, pleading for patience, perseverance: rebuild the country destroyed by the Fascists. The stepped-up Five-Year Plan. The Party. 'We understand, Comrade,' said the furnace stoker, 'but take a look at my shoes. Tell that to the Party.'

'Comrade, you must understand...' What must the Comrade understand? The people have taken over the means of production—the mines, the banks, the land. No more rich and poor. 'What about my shoes, Comrade?' repeated the stoker. The stoker left the room, clumsily clapping his dusty cap on his head.

There was no one with whom Zoltan could share his worries. Karolinszky wouldn't listen. Bereznay just smiled politely, apologetically, as if saying, Terrible, just terrible, but I... And the others? The other men in white among whom he lived in the clean corridors, the operating rooms, the sickrooms, the laboratories, the offices; the doctors, nurses, elevator operators, stokers, clerks, gardeners, telephone operators, charwomen, chauffeurs, gateman—yes, what would the others have said if

he had spoken to them of his frustration, if he had had the strength, the courage . . . Because Zoltan, even in his dreams, saw nothing but this swirling crowd, the twisted faces beneath the mirror-smooth surface, the endless march of people who suddenly stiffened at his approach, who hastened to agree almost before his question was out. After long months of torment he suddenly understood that behind their quick assents lurked a deep and deadly muteness.

One day in late April, to put an end to his brooding, he phoned the assistant chief of the Party's cadre division, the only man in the apparatus whom he knew and who, he felt, could not only understand his pain but could also give absolution. He asked for an appointment as soon as possible. The cadre man's dry reply—Well now, let's see, Comrade; it would be best if you came in, say, a week from tomorrow, at eleven in the morning, all right?—not only annoyed but disturbed him. It seemed impossible that the man should not have a free half hour—even a quarter hour—for the hospital's condition, the contagious infection whose main symptom was that there were no symptoms. Back of the cool, disinterested tone of the assistant cadre chief, Zoltan felt not just reservation but plain distrust as well. Who doesn't he trust? Zoltan wondered as he hung up the telephone. Me? There was something wrong, very wrong. But maybe he was just too busy with preparations for the May Day celebration.

Everything which had once seemed so simple and attainable had, in these past weeks, become misty, impalpable. His white-hot enthusiasm, the vision of a spacious future built on ideals stronger than steel, had drooped and chilled. The fever of those postwar days was suddenly gone completely, and in strange fashion the swift drop indicated not health but illness. What was happening?

Around him the crowd heaved, hummed, lurched forward and ground to a halt, dissolved and coagulated again—this crowd which had descended upon the city in honor of the holiday, flooding the main arteries, choking off the side streets, burying the city squares, endless and monotonous, rolling along toward duty become meaningless. Far away, in the middle of the enormous square, Stalin's statue emerged, five stories high. It floated above the tide, a mysterious smile about its mustache, one hand raised to beckon—or strike? The loudspeakers were bellowing. 'We salute the workers of the April Fourth Paper Factory, who, in celebration of May First, the

great holiday of the working class and all the people's democracies, exceeded their schedule by thirty-two per cent, and . . .'

'Half past three,' Bereznay said sourly. He was holding up a tall flagstaff. The red cloth drooped in the unstirring air. 'What do you think, Zoltan, when will it be our turn?' He shifted his weight to the other foot, wincing. It was hot. Zoltan didn't answer.

Restlessly, Bereznay looked toward sprawling Town Park. Beyond the dusty, scraggly bushes, behind the green crowns of the sunbathed trees, deep down the winding footpaths, lay childhood—huddled and hidden. The shady playgrounds of the grove echoing with the thud of home-made soccer balls. The stiff bronze figure of George Washington. The silently rippling, shallow lake. The creaky old rowboats. The jar in which you kept crested salamanders. The towers of Vajdahunyad Fortress sinking into twilight. The Japanese garden with the tiny wooden bridges over its trickling rivulets. The moss roses. The tombstone bearing the one word, *Fruit*. The amazing little locomotives of the Museum of Transportation. The skating rink, its lights atwinkle. The Waldteufel waltz. The stag jump. Father's well-waxed, angry mustache and tight-fitting uniform. The severe, symmetrical, one-story villa on Ilku Street with its high stone wall—so very hard to escape for a little loafing. For, of course, it was forbidden to loaf. It was forbidden to play ball in the grove, because a gentleman—as Father categorically put it—does not mix with proletarians, remember that, my son. It was forbidden to play bride-and-groom on the low steps leading from the Washington Monument to the lake, because surely you won't stoop to playing games with those unwashed Jewish brats, you, a colonel's son. And it was forbidden, moreover, to steal moss roses, although these would quickly take root in your garden at the foot of the hawthorns; forbidden to catch crested salamanders; and forbidden to . . . Bereznay smiled sadly. The don'ts which it felt so good to disobey had long since disappeared into time's labyrinth. They had left no trace, as there was no trace of the landscape of childhood. There where the entrance to the Town Park used to be, opposite the tree-lined promenade under whose spreading trees, in autumn, horse chestnuts by the thousands lay silkily shiny; there, in the place of the curly-tailed, cast-iron dragons, now rose the Idol and around it the streaming crowd. A little nearer, where the Church of Mary's Reign had once stood, there was nothing now: about a year and a half ago, the

church had been torn down. Gone, too, was the theater, where, on a hot Sunday afternoon, he had first seen Hanna Honthy, the prima donna, when, at the end of act three, with tears in her big blue eyes, she said yes to the archduke, Gyula Csontos. Vanished, too, were the bumpy old tracks and their yellow trolley cars, without his having once, just once, hung from the bumpers, like any ordinary kid from Stephen Avenue; and vanished the little iron huts of the trolley stops, where you could find shelter from the summer downpours. And over there, beyond the bushes? The neat gravel paths were riddled with weeds. The flower beds, untended, have collapsed. The lake was covered with slime. The crested salamanders have perished. The rowboats have rotted. The spider has woven his webs around the little bridges of the Japanese garden. The Museum of Transportation was destroyed by bombs. The villa on Ilka Street was requisitioned. The trees of the grove were decimated during the winter of the siege. Father was killed in the break-through at Voronyezh. It's the end, Bereznay thought, the end of everything. Before him, its huge basalt blocks slowly turning white-hot, loomed the square: merciless, geometrical, stupefying, a symbol of the new don'ts which were taking the place of those that had turned to dust. What is left of Town Park? the surgeon thought and closed his eyes. What is left of ourselves?

'My tongue is hanging out from this heat,' Zoltan said with unusual vehemence. They had been marking time for over an hour and a half. 'I'd like to have the whole organizing committee brought before the disciplinary...' Bereznay did not answer. He was busy with his flag, which had suddenly rolled off its staff, come unwound, broad and useless.

The march now resumed jerkily, but only to stop in its tracks again after a few tentative steps. All around them, up to the whitewash limits carefully marked off for the procession, familiar faces whirled about—men and women, young and old, all together. Everyone had his designated place here. The planning had begun weeks before. Everyone had been handed his part, insignificant in themselves but extraordinary in their cumulative effect. Collections were taken up to provide for the manufacture of May Day decorations. The State Planning Bureau entrusted a few textile factories with a special commission: they were to produce huge quantities of red, white and green drapery for the decking out of factories, offices, houses and streets. The Central Bureaus of Commerce established temporary distributing posts for this colossal amount of

goods. The office glee clubs rehearsed the songs which they were to sing from street to street. The choral recitation groups sounded off crisply and energetically with festive slogans and watchwords expressing, simply and succinctly, the most complicated thoughts. Party representatives convinced everybody that attending the May Day parade was the patriotic duty of all those who wanted to demonstrate on behalf of Peace, Socialism, the Communist Party and the great Soviet Union and against the American imperialist warmongers and their Titoist lackeys. In factories and business concerns, at every lathe, drill, press, desk or store counter, they emphasized that attendance wasn't obligatory for anyone, although unwarranted absentees would only be helping those who wished to thwart the success of the people's holiday, which is to say—to avoid misunderstanding—the enemy.

Meanwhile the organizers had conscientiously mapped out the city, estimated the size of the crowd, calculated the capacities of streets, avenues and squares, determined the width and speed of the marching columns, designated the starting points, the points of confluence, separation, by-passing and rest. The fully detailed plan was then submitted for approval to the secretariat of the Greater Budapest Party Commission. The secretariat, in a special session, considered the plan and recommended several less than essential changes. The approved plan was then brought before the Politbureau, which passed it without debate.

A few days later the temporary grandstands on both sides of the Stalin Monument had been ready. (These were to accommodate such members of the State and Party hierarchy as were not entitled—because of their lower rank or assignment—to a place on the stone parapet of the monument itself; that was the exclusive privilege of the highest leadership.) The grandstands, which were the destination of the parade, also marked the area behind the Stalin Monument for the parking of trucks to carry away, at the parade's end, the poles which bore the flags, portraits and signs. The planning committee naturally took into account the needs and limits of human performance; accordingly, on the large grassy plots bordering the dusty paths of the park, makeshift booths and tents sprouted up overnight. Here cold drinks, foaming beer, piles of freshly cooked frankfurters awaited the marchers.

A little farther off, behind the Széchenyi Baths, the nationalized amusement concessions opened their doors. Scrubbed clean, the carousel awoke from its winter sleep. Fresh brown

paint glistened on the saddles of the wooden horses, and the giraffes extended their necks merrily. The tracks of the roller coaster gleamed, mirror-smooth. The giant Ferris wheel (from whose top you could see across the Town Park's elms, past the zoo's artificial North Pole—once the home of the polar bears, but nowadays housing only a few bedraggled brown bears—all the way to the bronze angel of the Millennial Memorial) stood ready. In the House of Horrors, the dragon proudly displayed his ocher crest, spotted with blue. In the shooting galleries, the little wire-pulled rabbits were gaily pointing their cardboard ears.

But, when the time had come, nothing worked out the way the party officials in charge of planning and organizing had imagined it. The procession seemed to be faltering already in the early-morning hours. According to schedule, the parade was to have ended by two P.M., but by a quarter to three one could see neither middle nor end to the multitude streaming toward the monument. It was as if the throng had taken revenge on the organizers by relentlessly multiplying itself and spilling its angry waves over the whole city. From various side streets, unexpectedly, measureless crowds would roll out in living denial of the neat, preconceived plans. Leaving behind them their irregular deltas, the billows swept out to sea, swelling the volume of the miscalculated ocean. But nothing much came of it. Sweating organizers with armbands cropped up all over as if out of nowhere; instructions, orders, snorts of command whizzed through the air: the sea had to be squeezed back into its basin, leveled and subdued. The public-address system renewed its braying. 'Back, Comrades, back into line; that's it, calmly now...' A tremor went through the lines now, as though they had been struck with a whip; they fought down their instinctive resistance and closed ranks, frozen motionless in the heat.

Zoltan was hemmed in by tired, sweaty, sagging bodies. There wasn't room enough for one step forward or back. He could feel old Mother Fekete's moist breath on the back of his neck, while his nose almost bumped into the graying, dandruff-covered hair of the unknown man shuffling in front of him. Suddenly there was silence. The loud-speakers, as if exhausted by the daylight bellowing, gave a last croak and were still. The cheering, too, subsided. Here and there a few brusque words could be heard, a cough, the clearing of a throat, someone dragging his feet. Zoltan recognized in this the dumb silence of total exhaustion; yet instead of feeling eased by this brief re-

spite, his stomach heaved even more desperately.

Dr. Wass suddenly grabbed his arm. 'Terrific,' he said very loudly. 'There is no other word for it. Terrific. True, the thing has dragged on a bit, something went wrong with the organization. You get hungry and tired, too, but just the same——'

'A stein of beer!' Berezney interrupted and swallowed hard. 'With pretzels.'

'You're stupid, my boy,' Dr. Wass said, half turning toward him, 'just plain stupid. We'd be in fine shape with your crass materialism. Who said a glass of beer wouldn't be nice? Of course it would.' He extended his arm, pointing above their heads at the crowd. 'Exhaustion? Thirst? Isn't all this worth it? You won't see enthusiasm like this every day, let me tell you.'

Zoltan felt an explosion of cold fury inside him. What is this pig driveling about? *What* enthusiasm? Where? He lowered his head, afraid that someone might see his anxiety and read it as doubt. A sweaty, weary, dispirited crowd was undulating around him. There was jeering or bored resignation in their faces. The people were so worn out that they no longer even pretended excitement or hid their lethargy; they didn't give a damn about the supervisors, organizers, Party Secretaries who popped up in their midst. There was an occasional burst of angry bellowing which went unnoticed only by those who had decided ahead of time what they would hear today. They're tired, Zoltan thought. Of course they're tired; why shouldn't they be? Tired? Wasn't it something more than simple fatigue? The Party Secretary remembered the first, the very first May Day parade; the jubilant celebration of a passionately longed-for peace. In Berlin, around the Chancellery, the guns still thundered, but their noise no longer carried this far. From the cellars, from the rubble of burnt-out houses, from carefully protected hiding places, the living crawled out, blinking in the radiance and incredulously sniffing the fresh odor of lilac that streamed down from the hills—we've survived it, they thought with the painful stab of joy mixed by sadness, for there were many who had not survived it. Then they went about restoring order to the scorched land. How everything hummed, bubbled, eddied and whirled! The bridges had hurtled into the Danube, the ruins were still smoking, the smell of gunpowder still lingered in the air, but already . . . We were free, Zoltan thought. And now, I suppose, we're not free? Isn't this May Day proof that . . . That what? That our people are united. In a completely different historical situation, feelings are differ-

ent, too. I'd be a fool to demand the same enthusiasm today.

From afar came the sound of sluggish cheering. The loud-speakers bawled again. 'Onward and upward with our Party, thanks to whose leadership...' Zoltan tried to free his arm, but Dr. Wass clung to his sleeve as if he were worried that the crowd might sweep him away. He's lying, Zoltan thought. He's lying, the bastard. He likes this parade about as much as ... But who does like it, for God's sake?

Dr. Wass suddenly raised himself on tiptoe. 'Such unity! Such enthusiasm, my boy!' he reiterated. 'Take a look at this if you really want to see something.' He glanced back surreptitiously. Berezney looked disgusted. The assistant chief remained unperturbed. In fact, the surgeon's revulsion filled him with malicious delight, for he knew that the fellow was powerless against him, no matter how great his disgust (which Wass didn't mind, because he compared disgust, like feelings in general, to the common cold: easy enough to catch, but just as easy to get rid of). All the more so since he had managed to ferret out why Berezney, at the time of his assignment to the hospital two years before, chose to deny his title, even though the Party investigating committee could have had no doubt about his noble descent. Wass knew very well that one's value in the eyes of the would-be all-seeing powers increased in direct proportion to the amount of actual and potential information stored up in you. So he merely threw a friendly arm around Berezney's shoulders and looked at him with heartfelt condolence, as one who understands the other's worries, pities his helplessness but cannot, alas, change the situation: bilateral infection, perfectly deteriorated lymphoid tissues, hormonal hyperplasia—good night, sweet prince. Berezney's shoulders twitched. In the corners of his eyes there suddenly appeared a hitherto unknown, tight, cruel expression, which so transformed the otherwise delicate, slightly girlish face that Wass, startled, averted his head. God damn it, I'm not going to let myself be frightened by him! Tomorrow I'll have to drop another word of warning to ...

His nervousness abated a little when he noticed that his comments to the Party Secretary had found more than one attentive listener, exactly as intended. What's this, my friends, are you falling for my act? *Touché*, Zoltan, I have witnesses that I was enthusiastic, yes, sir, enthusiastic. Why shouldn't I have been? Anyone who isn't enthusiastic is an idiot. Unity, Comrade Lieutenant, enthusiasm, discipline, strength, beauty ... May he rot in hell, whoever invented this enthusiasm. But

if that's what they want, that's what they'll get. . . . For a long time he had known that his masters, who had planned this senseless circus, had perhaps never been interested in what he thought, only in what he said. What he thought remained untouched in the depths, hidden with care behind the armor of smiles and nods, the nervous self-deception, fenced in by the barbed wire of vengefulness, anger, hatred, shame and spite, within himself; for no one was interested in his thoughts, no one cared or even gave a damn about them. Indeed, if one had had to love all that *they* said had to be loved, perhaps this prison would have become more bearable; perhaps the warmth of love (in which he believed so little) would have softened the soul's armor—for it hardly matters what you love so long as you can feel yourself loving. But you didn't have to love anything. Not the leaders, not the flags, not the marchers, not the cause; just as *they* didn't love anyone, they demanded no love from others. It was enough if you *proclaimed* your love; this is what earned you praise, decorations, promotions, money and, above all, a certain specious security. A moment ago Wass had taken malevolent pleasure in the scornful looks earned by his maneuver; now he experienced, in the tension of the suddenly surging crowd, not only the dread power of impersonal force assaulting his being but also—as never before in his life—a preposterous, indissoluble, helpless loneliness, a loneliness which existed simply because there wasn't anyone to whom he'd dare confess that he wanted to live differently.

They were running already.

The square suddenly tilted, as if an invisible giant had lifted the end nearest Stephen Avenue, and the crowd thundered forward, impelled by the full momentum of their inertia. Down the slope they went, as if trying to recover a fraction of their forfeited time. The loud-speakers were blaring away full blast. But no one paid attention to them any more. The lines bent, twitched, snaked, then flowered together. By now nobody recognized anybody; the most intimate factory and office groups were dispersed; foreign, unknown faces were crowding against one another, gasping, panting, as if they wanted to avenge their hurts with this frantic helter-skelter. The square, the crowd, everything lost its equilibrium; neither instructions, nor pleading, nor commands were of any use. The herd had broken down the fence of many hours' coercion; in the rousing impetus of the race it scented not only the approaching end of a whole day's suffering but also its own unused possibilities.

Head lowered, sweaty, snorting, it stampeded past pictures held high and banners unfurled toward its senseless destination.

Zoltan was swept away in the tide. The waves lifted him, dropped him, snatched him up on their crests anew and tossed him down again. In his weariness he almost fell on his face a couple of times. But he did not care. He enjoyed the running; he enjoyed his thoughtless, stubborn hurtling; the cold, moist sweat against his temples; the flagging body's ultimate exertion, which, having taken possession of his every muscle and nerve, granted him—for a few moments at least—oblivion of the soul's increasing impotence.

It was only a quarter of eleven when Zoltan got off the trolley at the corner of Akademia Street for his appointment with the assistant chief of the cadre division. For a while he simply stood on the corner, not knowing what to do with his time. He saw no cars or passers-by. For quite some time now traffic had been barred from this narrow gray street—a stone's throw from the Danube embankment—where the Party had had its headquarters since the war. At both ends of the rather short street, signs warned vehicles that it was a restricted area. A little farther on, under cover of corners and recesses, soldiers of the Secret Police with Tommy guns stood guard and checked unauthorized cars. Though the ban did not include pedestrians, everyone gave the quadrangle as wide a berth as possible. Cut off from the city's life, the street grew deathly still and gradually withered away. Zoltan, though understanding the need for strict surveillance, felt an ugly little cramp in his stomach.

Now a big black Chevrolet rolled up to the main entrance. A man of medium height in a brown suit sprang out and obsequiously opened the car's rear door. Zoltan caught a brief glimpse of the passenger, who disappeared behind the gate without bothering to acknowledge the guard's stiff salute. He was a tall, slightly bent figure with graying hair, wearing a well-cut suit and carrying a yellow pigskin briefcase. The Chevrolet suddenly took off, then turned noiselessly at the next corner toward the Danube. There the site of a bombed-out house served as a parking lot for the car pool at Party headquarters. The brand-new American cars—there were only four or five in the entire city—were exclusively for the use of the top Party leaders, so Zoltan was sure that the passenger had been one of them. He walked over to the river's edge.

In these early-morning hours the embankment was deserted; he saw no one walking on the weed-ridden warm cobblestones. The Danube, which at winter's end had angrily flooded the shore, rising almost to the trolley tracks atop the stone dike, was ebbing now and heaved with gray silt. A grimy little tug was struggling northward, croaking, puffing, towing three barges piled high with sand and gravel. On one of them freshly washed shirts fluttered gaily on the invisible line as if they had conquered the force of gravity. Across the river the steeple of the Matthias Church was still being repaired, but not a man could be seen on the scaffolding that rose skyward. From time to time trucks rumbled past him, but their growl did not disturb the quiet that suddenly congealed in the heat, hovering like a giant umbrella above the light-drenched city. Zoltan sat down on the lowest of the worn, narrow stone steps leading to the river, slightly hunched, perspiring. He dipped his fingers into the water. It was luke-warm. I'd do better taking a swim, he thought, than . . .

What was actually wrong with that May Day? The hot weather? We had to stand around so long we became drained of all emotion? But did we ever have true emotion? Is the fault in me? I never did like collective enthusiasm (because I see no sense to it, or because it just makes me nervous?), singing by command, prolonged applause which forces someone else's emotions upon people.

He mopped his brow. It was very hot. 'Comrade Zoltan's chief trouble,' lisped harelippped Erzsi Gacs, a particularly revolting female at the Party school, 'Comrade Zoltan's chief trouble is that he simply won't integrate into the community.' Your chief trouble, damn you, thought Zoltan, is that no one in the community would want to get within a mile of you if he could help it. The Party school director, from behind his black-rimmed glasses, gave him a probing glance. 'Think a minute, my boy,' he had said very emotionally. 'Don't you feel that your detachment has ideological roots—no, don't even try to protest—ideological roots or, to be more exact, class content?' He seemed very grave. 'Look, my son,' the director had said warmly, 'there's no point in beating about the bush. You're a sensible man. Your background makes your alienation from society understandable—it's nothing you need be ashamed of. The small peasant milieu from which you come—as you well know—is an individualistic, self-centered world, which clings stubbornly to its past, even when that past is fraught with poverty and suffering. Isn't that true? Of course. And what

can we conclude from all this? We cannot escape one conclusion that whoever comes from this world, regardless of his intentions, is filled with a deep individualism and a fear of the community as a whole. Otherwise what could explain the small peasant's dread of our farm cooperative movement? And what could explain your reluctance to melting completely into the collective world?'

Zoltan walked up to the entrance of the Party Headquarters Building. The guard, a short, suntanned young man in the uniform of the Secret Police, stopped him.

'Where to, Comrade?' he asked. 'Your identification!' Zoltan muttered where he was going and limply handed over his Party membership card. The guard, after laboriously comparing the photograph with the original before him, while shifting his weight from one foot to the other, took from his breast pocket a carefully folded, closely typed sheet and began studying it attentively. Zoltan looked at the suntanned young face, hostile in the enveloping shadows and yet likable. Those slanted eyes had the open directness of a childhood playmate; the broad fleshy nose and the arched sensual mouth seemed to contradict his superior manner. He's a pleasant lad doing his duty, Zoltan thought cheerfully. But could it be his duty to . . . ? On the sheet the guard had found what he was looking for. He crossed out Zoltan's name with a small stub of a pencil, then returned the little red book to him. 'Are you armed, Comrade?' he asked with the same distrust.

'No,' said Zoltan, his spirits suddenly rising. Why would I be armed? And if I were? Would I tell you if I didn't want to?

Search me if you really want to know. But the guard, after folding the sheet according to regulations and replacing it in his breast pocket, only pressed a bell on the gatepost.

'One moment, Comrade,' he said, barring the way. 'Please be patient.' Zoltan did not reply. From the dim doorway another soldier appeared and beckoned. Zoltan stepped in, looking back. But the guard had already forgotten him. Arms akimbo; feet apart, he guarded the gate. His holster had slipped down his waist a bit.

Inside it was cooler. In the dim light Zoltan saw only the back of the leisurely plodding soldier. They came to a few steps, then to a huge glass door which separated the vestibule from the interior of the building. Behind the glass door stood a third guard. At their approach he opened the door. Zoltan hesitated. 'Second floor,' said his escort.

'Second floor,' repeated Zoltan softly. 'I remember now.' The glass door closed behind him. His escort remained outside.

The thick old walls kept out not only the heat but the noise as well. He looked about cautiously. Behind him the third guard watched. Zoltan had sensed the surveillance at the nape of his neck. Now the great oak door opposite the entrance opened. A charwoman stepped from behind it with a pail full of water, a brand-new broom in her hand, walking warily. In the obscurity Zoltan did not see the woman's face, only her speckled kerchief. From beneath the kerchief peeped a thin lock of gray hair. Zoltan walked toward the great broad staircase in the pious stillness which enveloped him, timeless and paralyzing and yet not at all offensive.

An unbroken stream of light bathed the staircase, as if a carefully hidden source were flooding the soft red carpet, the bright brass rails, the spotless stone banister. At the landing a bespectacled man in a linen suit walked by carrying sheafs of papers under his arm, lost in thought. The rug absorbed the sound of his steps.

On the big oak doors of the first floor Zoltan saw familiar names. And what names, my God! This was the central nerve system, the offices of the members of the Political Committee. Zoltan stood sheepishly in the corridor, which was furnished with comfortable armchairs, gleaming tables with heavy crystal ashtrays and lush plants. Who was he to stand up to these men? Who was he to tell them what faults he had found in the country, what griefs weighed him down, what doubts plagued him? Did not the men who sat behind those massive dark doors, isolated from noise, heat and harsh everyday cares, supervising the exact functioning of millions of cells, creating uniformity out of conflict, realizing the dreams of centuries, did not they already know everything he had wanted to tell them? They were the ones who knew the answer when the question was still unformed in ordinary men. They were the ones who, with a genial smile—or ruthless severity, if need be—decided disputes, cut through Gordian knots, without ever losing faith in themselves and their mission. Suddenly he saw them behind the thick, cool walls, leaning over their desks pondering proposals, studying reports, drafting fresh ideas which would change both the present and the future.

He wanted to leave but he couldn't even move. The walls radiated a numbing force—so solid and yet so simple. Everything he had been preparing to say for weeks suddenly was dwarfed to insignificance in the cold, wise glow created by the

glistening white walls, the soft rugs, the deep armchairs, the potted palms. Zoltan leaned against the wall, perspiring. To go into battle or die for the cause would have been easier. After all, death meant ultimate identification with the growing community of heroic dead. That was the kind of profound union for which he vainly strove in life and which here seemed so out of reach. But he must live—live and answer for all he did and didn't do, for what he would still do or would never do. Here, there was no mercy, no forgiveness; he felt it. The walls, the doors, the rugs, the armchairs radiated retribution for his wavering faith, the inescapable fate which was the more just for its mercilessness, the more comprehensible in its mysteriousness. A sense of dread overcame him, an evil, utterly inexplicable dread born of impotence and insignificance.

For here it no longer mattered who he was, what he wished or didn't wish; it didn't matter that he was sad on Monday and gay on Tuesday, that he grieved for his mistress or was glad to be rid of her at last, that his mother fell ill or recovered, that he was slow to rise or leap from his bed. In this building only one thing mattered: how to make his life useful in the worldwide struggle of the People. That was the law, the irrevocable truth, and it meant the destruction of what was most palpably his: his since birth; his sole possession; that never-to-be-repeated essence of memories and fancies, colors and fragrances, desires and disappointments, guilt and contrition—himself. And yet in the conscious self-sacrifice held a certain consoling warmth. The voluntary offering of himself, as in the case of the medieval monks, had more than once lit within him the flame of life's meaning. From transience he had plucked permanence. The triumph of society compensates the individual for his defeat. And the urge for perfection was a source of joy as well as pain. Struggle often elevates more than failure dismays—such perhaps is the nature of happiness? This he still could understand.

But what he could not understand—here in this great strange silence, in this building that was more of a shrine than the command post of the people's battle—was why he who had devoted his whole life to the struggle, why he who had consciously subjected himself to the will emanating from behind those doors, never doubting the justice of the struggle—why should he now feel so disconsolate, vulnerable, stupid—and alone?

'Looking for someone, Comrade?'

He raised his head with difficulty. A tall, thin young man

stood before him. Zoltan smiled involuntarily. The sound of a human voice was strange in this silence. But the young man did not return the smile. 'No one—that is . . .' Zoltan glanced toward the second floor. He cleared his throat. 'The cadre division.'

'Cadre division,' said the young man stiffly, 'second floor.'

'Yes, Comrade,' said Zoltan, 'I know, the second . . .' He started up slowly, heavily. He stumbled on the steps. He felt the blood rush to his face. He looked back cautiously. The young man was still standing there watching him austere. Zoltan felt ashamed of himself.

At the office of the assistant cadre chief, they already knew of his arrival. The old red-necked secretary, wondering why it was taking Zoltan so long to get from the entrance to the second floor, had picked up the phone to the guard. As he walked in she dropped it back on its cradle and turned to him. 'Just a moment, Comrade.' She spoke in a waxy gray tone. 'Please be seated.' And she continued typing.

Zoltan's mood lifted when he finally stood opposite the short, swarthy man. He seemed to listen attentively as Zoltan, gradually regaining his composure, described the strange phenomena (as he called them) at the hospital and his observations at the May Day parade. He watched the ash of the cadre chief's cigarette grow and drop onto a snow-white shirt. The chief did not change his position even then; he just stretched out his artificial leg—which replaced the one he had supposedly lost in the Spanish Civil War—and leaned back in his chair.

Just then, the strong, sharp May light flooded the room. For the first time Zoltan saw the deep pallor and weariness that hid beneath the gypsy-brown skin of the cadre chief's face.

The assistant cadre chief seemed irked. 'Continue, Comrade! Continue!' he said, lighting a fresh cigarette. 'What you say is most interesting. So you think Dr. Wass lied?'

'Yes, he lied.' Zoltan repeated the word. 'I really know him——'

The chief cut him off sharply. 'Comrade Zoltan, your ability to spot a lie is quite astounding. Would you teach me your secret?'

'There's no secret,' Zoltan said, perplexed. 'In my opinion, he was lying. Why would I tell you if——'

'Strange logic.' The cadre chief spoke slowly, enunciating each syllable. 'According to your colleague, the march was splendid and, what is more, showed our people's mass support

of our Party. Is that right?’

‘Yes,’ said Zoltan very softly. He bowed his head.

‘And what did you think of it?’ The question crackled and flashed.

‘I ... I ...’ His head whirled. Should he tell him that ... Would he understand? Or did he know anyhow? Why, then he must also know that ... Yet why does he doubt me? The world suddenly went black. The executioner was raising the ax. There was no time. The question must be answered. One must always answer. One couldn’t say nothing. Silence was an answer, too. True or false? Did you kill or didn’t you? Are you for us or against? The crowd roars. The loud-speakers bray. *We greet the April Fourth Machine Factory ...* A man raises a white kerchief. The executioner watches. What is he waiting for? Horsemen approach at a gallop. The sun flashes on their swords a message from the king? Or death? *Glory and gratitude to the liberating Soviet Army ...*

‘Well?’ the assistant cadre chief urged.

‘According to me, too,’ said Zoltan, mopping his brow, ‘it was like that, Comrade.’ Why don’t I dare tell him that ... But what was it really like? The executioner suddenly lowered the ax. Did I escape? But from what? ‘What do you think? When will it be our turn?’ Bereznay had asked sourly. What did I think of it? I must be mistaken. I saw only a small, isolated part, a segment of the whole. Surely the total effect ... But I can’t be mistaken, that shit. *All hail our Party leadership, our people ...* He was lying. I lied too. The falsehood was revealed, the condemned man released. By order of the king ... What king? A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!

‘Strange logic,’ Zoltan heard the assistant cadre chief say again, as if he were far away. ‘Your views, then, are identical with Dr. Wass’. Isn’t that so?’

‘Yes,’ Zoltan held his breath.

‘The sole difference is that you, Comrade Zoltan, doubt your colleague’s sincerity.’

‘Yes.’

‘If, on the other hand, your colleague had said that the whole march was a tiresome farce, you would have no doubt that he was telling the truth.’

‘No, but——’

‘No *buts*!’ The chief suddenly got up. The short muscular body grew in the light, filling the small room. ‘No double-talk, Comrade Party Secretary. If someone berates us, he’s telling the truth. If he praises, then of course he’s lying. Why not

come out with it and say that the press is lying, the radio's lying, the Party is lying? Or maybe Comrade Zoltan is lying? Perhaps it's only his opinion that May Day was not as we saw it and he will malign others in order to voice that opinion. Why aren't you frank with the Party, Comrade Zoltan? Why don't you bare your problems to us? Have you something to hide? Haven't you learned in seven years that no one ever got into trouble by speaking his mind and sticking by his guns? But whoever keeps secrets from the Party . . .'

After Zoltan left, the cadre chief took a big stretch and limped to the open window for a breath of air. Below, the narrow street was lifeless and the opposite side was already gradually falling into shadow. The distant drone of a motor sounded. From the smudged closed windows across the way, no one looked back at him, not even his own reflection. The house had been requisitioned two weeks before and they had not yet begun the renovations. Like a flood, the ever-growing Party apparatus had long since squeezed out those who dwelt in the little streets nearby, yet there was no sign of an ebb; new divisions arose, new people came from the villages and the factories. As power consolidated, the need for space grew; they broke through apartment walls, built passageways from one house to another, walled up entrances and opened new ones. And who dared complain of the evictions? That's the way it goes, mused the assistant cadre chief; my turn today, yours tomorrow.

He glanced at his watch. Not quite eleven-thirty. He had finished fast with that fellow. He loathed people who conveyed their agitation by any means save clever, cool argument, and Zoltan could by no stretch of the imagination be said to have argued cleverly, coolly. It depressed him. To his mind there was only one more dangerous thing in the world than betrayal—namely, self-betrayal. In the course of many decades as a revolutionary, so many had betrayed him that he had developed an acute sense of caution—especially with regard to himself. He was only wary of others; himself he feared. If others betray a man, that's a sin; but if he betrays himself, that's a tactical error worse than sin. This Zoltan betrayed to me the secret he is hiding even from himself; his cowardice. That's suicide. He still doesn't know, but I do. After all, that's why I'm here, to differentiate lies from even greater lies. And the greatest lie is when a man is sincere. That's what the lad is. Anyone who doesn't understand that men fear him because he

represents power cannot be trusted by power. The revolutionary without ruthlessness is a bourgeois moralist. Ruthlessness without revolutionary spirit is a sexual aberration. He who in the interest of revolution cannot exploit men's fear of him deserves to tremble before the revolution. The chief had made a notation on Zoltan's dossier: *To be relieved. By whom? Let Bacskai make a recommendation. Deadline: July 1.*

The day ahead was still long. Lia was not expecting him until half past seven. I must get a bottle of liquor, he thought; Lia was willing to go to bed with him only when she was drunk, disheveled, her belly heaving, like a pig. No matter. He couldn't get rid of her—or didn't he want to? He went to see her twice a week if he had the time, and she always whipped him to a frenzy with a steady stream of dirty language. Everything had to be planned in detail, like clockwork. He didn't worry much about his wife any more—that aging German female he had married in Paris. She had long since stopped asking questions and accepted any excuse, even got used to not seeing him for days. But the most exacting explanations were required by two persons: his secretary and his chauffeur. It wasn't difficult, though. Besides, he held them in the palm of his hand—his secretary because of her Lesbian bent, the chauffeur because of his former membership in the Fascist Arrow Cross party. Anyway, he liked the chauffeur, a dolt who chattered a lot, asked few questions, never rocked the boat. He always dismissed him at Adalak. The villa was still a good quarter-hour walk from there. Lia would wait for him in the garden, her breasts tumbling out of her negligee. She usually was already tipsy, but a light jag would not do. She wanted to drink and drink. Her fleshy red lips clung to the bottle, then to his mouth.

Down on the street a young man ambled by with open collar, swinging a briefcase. The chief looked at him absently. He thought about the May Day celebration four days ago. He hated the mobs herded out by command, the incessantly bawling loud-speakers, the stupid slogans, the waving from the stands through the long, long hours, the bald ruffian—Father of the People, indeed!—with his nauseating smile, the way his colorless eyebrows shot up in surprise, his pedantic remarks that were printed in the papers the next day as sheer revelation. The chief had known him from prison days and had secretly detested him ever since. Never could he forget how he had rummaged in the rare gift parcels—prison Party secretary, fine pretext—and pilfered them, selecting the best tidbits for

himself, while the others . . .

Now he looked up at the sky. A thin blue strip gleamed above his head, motionless, bright, with disarming simplicity. He felt neither pity, nor joy, nor hate, nor forgiveness, nor relief, nor satisfaction. A great yawning emptiness hovered above him, a stubborn deaf silence which filled the whole accursed world.

Somewhere church bells were announcing noon. Zoltan grew suddenly attentive to the dull peals, wondering and curious, as if he were hearing them for the first time in years. What was their message? He tried to recall the noons of his childhood, but his mind went blank, as if it had dried out. He just sat at his desk, feeling powerless and revolted. Later, when the peals had disintegrated in the fuzzy warm air and the room was filled again with the rustle of branches outside the window, he remembered the letter they had given him at the desk that morning before he saw the cadre chief; he had stuffed it into his pocket unopened. He took it out now and placed it on the desk in front of him. His mother's handwriting danced on the yellow envelope. As he gazed at it, a reluctant hostility rose in his throat. Complaints, nothing but complaints . . . What could he answer? Although for a long time now he had responded with brief and increasingly colder notes, she kept sending her reports on relatives, friends, the village, all in endless serpentine sentences that wound on and on without commas or periods. Nowadays only his mother wrote him. The old man was always tired. With Feri, his younger brother, he'd exchanged only a few short notes since joining the Party seven years ago. The letter lay there a long while before him. Should he open it? He knew every line in advance—the obstinate incomprehension, the narrow-mindedness, the prayers: don't worry, my son, God will help us, our lot will improve. . . . Was their lot really so bad? Why didn't they listen to him? Why couldn't they understand that the Party . . . Perhaps time—yes, time—would show them who was right. He shut his eyes and leaned back in his chair, thinking of fragrant meadows where horses neighed, of plodding cows that raised the dust on roads in the quietly filtering twilight. It was a delusion. Time proved nothing and solved nothing; time only separated them from each other still more. His mother's small, bent frame was hardly visible in the distance. No, he could no longer run to her, hide in her apron smelling of flour and hay. One autumn, when he was seventeen, he had crossed a graveyard at mid-

night on a bet, He had felt no fear. With pounding heart, head erect, his whole being filled with a strange, senseless rage, he had swept down the weed-choked paths between the sombre brown wood crosses and the sunken damp mounds, among the dead, he the sole living being on the whole globe. This chill and monstrous aloneness, this blind anger, swelled in him again now as he slowly turned his mother's letter between his fingers. Why didn't he open it? Did he fear the reprimands, the complaints that entwined him like seaweed, dragging him down, down into sightless depths? In vain did he abhor the peasant mulishness, the ancient distrust—if men won't go of their own accord, drag them!—for he felt that slowly he too was falling under the spell of some irrational dread, some pitiful dumb fear, where the unknown repulsed the known and the chaos of ignorance triumphed over ordered knowledge. As if to stir up the embers of his certainty with a blast of artificially whipped-up passion, so that the swift blaze might consume all doubt, he brusquely tore up the yellow envelope and flung the pieces into a small wicker basket that stood by his desk.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Four days after his talk with the cadre chief, Zoltan's routine morning inspection of the glistening white corridors, wards and laboratories seemed to him more meaningless and nauseating than ever before. Smiles, smiles everywhere. Why all the good humor? Near the door of the operating room No. 3 he finally turned angrily on the lame radiologist. 'Would you mind telling me why you're grinning from ear to ear?'

The radiologist drew Zoltan toward the wall as the head nurse from Surgery came by. 'Listen to this one. A teacher tells his class to write an essay on the relationship between the aristocracy and the church...' The radiologist guffawed nervously (Zoltan had never seen this quiet, studious young man laugh so hard) and then he repeated the obscene punch line several times. Suddenly he stopped, said that he had darkroom work to do and limped away quickly.

Zoltan decided to go upstairs to see Klara or, more precisely, Karolinszky. At the entrance to the chief's quarters he saw that Wass had got there just ahead of him. It was nine

o'clock; Wass's report would take a quarter of an hour. Zoltan decided to look in on the professor later. He trudged down the stairs as Bereznay was coming up. 'Good morning, good morning, how are you this beautiful day?' Another one up in the clouds, thought Zoltan. What the hell has gotten into all of them?

Reaching the hall porter's cubicle, he asked, 'Any mail for me, Vincze?'

'No, Comrade Zoltan,' said the hall porter dourly. During his days as a Red soldier in 1919 he lost his right arm and he had been angry at the world ever since. 'No, there's nothing. Anyway, if I had something for you...' Angrily he poked among the letters piled before him.

At last someone who's in a bad mood, thought Zoltan, almost relieved. He was just starting toward the elevator when the old man called after him. 'Comrade Zoltan, do you know what's wrong with the professor?'

'Wrong?' asked the doctor, surprised. 'What would be wrong?'

'Nothing, nothing,' said Vincze slyly, lowering his head, 'except that he still hasn't come in, and it's already past...'

The glass-enclosed waiting room with the giant potted palms was deserted. The leather armchairs sprawled empty beneath the cupola; the metal ashtrays, freshly cleaned, gleamed; old magazines lay in neatly dusted ranks. To the right a small tapestried door led to the accounting department and admissions office. For a while Zoltan stood in the warm, breezy silence; then, with a soft sigh, he started toward the elevator. Karolinszky still hadn't come in. Was that what had put them in such a good mood?

At the elevator door he bumped into Feldheimer. The stomatologist was about to enter. Zoltan stopped him and asked in a whisper, 'Do *you* know?'

'No' came the sharp, firm reply. 'I know nothing. My fund of knowledge is particularly low this year. Anyway, what is it I'm supposed to know?'

Zoltan forced a laugh. 'Listen, I'd like a word with you. Can you spare me five minutes?'

'For you, anytime,' Feldheimer answered. 'So you find me amusing? I never thought you would appreciate my decadent petty-bourgeois irony.'

Opposite the elevator, in an alcove separated by a glass window from the flower garden, stood a small round table and two wicker armchairs; it was the waiting room for the phar-

macy. The prescription window, cut in the wall, was still closed, since drugs were dispensed only after eleven o'clock. An elderly cleaning woman quickly finished dusting the thick leaves of the huge rhododendron in a corner and left as the doctors approached.

'Let's sit down,' Zoltan said. Feldheimer lit a cigarette with relish. Zoltan stared at the blank white wall as if flaming letters might appear on it and pose the question he could not formulate: *mene tekel* ...? But the wall showed nothing except sunlight playing on it, and Zoltan suddenly realized that he didn't know what he wanted to ask Feldheimer. Was he tongue-tied because he didn't want to seem disconcerted by the stomatologist's dry manner, or because he was plagued by the thought that Feldheimer knew what he wanted better than he did? In any case, Zoltan felt that something was going on inside himself, that some new sensibility had evolved, if only because he could not even cope with talking to Feldheimer. What should he ask?

Zoltan's obvious discomfort did not move the stomatologist; it intrigued him. From behind the cigarette smoke he observed the writhing Party Secretary. You're behind the eight ball, he thought with gleeful malice; it's your turn now. Afraid, aren't you? And you're right to be. Should I save you? No, I won't. The only escape from the uncertainty of isolation is to realize that you're on your own. But is there any escape at all? Irritably he shoved his silver cigarette holder under the Party Secretary's nose. 'A nice piece,' Baranyi had said, and his lean fox-face suddenly emerged from nothingness. 'From what you'd get for it at the Valeria market...' Drop dead, thought Feldheimer. Anyway, you were wrong. Or was he? Three weeks before he had run into Baranyi, richly elegant, reeking of Eau de Cologne, a snow-white handkerchief peeping from the breast pocket of his dark-blue suit. Baranyi had become a professor, Party Committee member of the University of Arts and Sciences, member of the presidium of the National Peace Council, a leader of the Hungarian-Soviet Society. And I? Baranyi's grin flickered before his eyes. Feldheimer mopped his perspiring brow. Could he have been right, after all?

Out of the elevator stepped Angela, the head nurse in the Out-Patients Department, blonde, trim, self-assured. She was returning from the admissions office, where she had hoped to learn something from her girl friend about the reason for

Karolinszky's absence, but the little dark woman had just stammered with fright. 'They've arrested him, I'm sure they have,' she had whispered, clapping her tiny hand to her mouth. 'Oh, come on,' said Angela, 'a Karolinszky? Look—stop stuttering and try to speak to Goldmann. He's usually well informed. Then call me. I don't want to stay here long. The beast might notice.' The beast was the charwoman in the Out-Patients Department, a member of the hospital's Party Committee. She nauseated Angela every time she saw her. Why didn't she have her teeth fixed? Once she had asked Feldheimer to scare her into it, but the stomatologist had just grumbled. 'What do you care? Let her and her teeth rot away.'

Seeing the two men smoking silently in the alcove, she stopped short. So it was true, after all. A tremor ran through her, but she took hold of herself and produced her most charming smile. 'Early morning conference?' she chirped. 'The comrades are diligent.' Neither answered, but that didn't bother her, and she danced away, tossing Zoltan a provocative smile.—partly as good strategy, partly to tease Feldheimer.

'Whore,' said Feldheimer under his breath. Zoltan knew that Angela was his mistress and he let the remark pass. He was glad that she had clawed Feldheimer; it relieved him. He looked after her with a show of interest, as if he had just discovered how pretty she was. The big glass doors closed behind Angela.

Zoltan pulled himself together. 'What do you think? Why didn't the old man come in?' he asked abruptly.

Feldheimer crushed the cigarette stub that was almost burning his nails. 'Guess,' he said in a grating voice. 'Let's see what your Marxism-Leninism is worth.'

'So you won't talk to me,' said Zoltan. He got up. 'That's surprising. Until now the trouble was that you wouldn't stop talking.'

'Keep cool,' said Feldheimer. 'Sit down nicely and fold your hands. I'm always ready to talk; I just don't feel like giving you my thoughts. But that's what you want, right? It would come in handy if Feldheimer sounded off, right? But why don't you ask the others? Consult the masses? Why not seek the help of our great Party? But maybe the Party is silent? Maybe our comrades are silent? Maybe the whole world is...' He broke off and fished out another cigarette.

Zoltan did not answer. It was true. They were silent. He ought to have known but he didn't. Everybody went by,

greeting him politely, even smiling, murmuring clichés, keeping him at a distance with jokes or professional talk—always hiding the real reasons for taciturnity, indifference, sorrow, excitement or good humor. He glanced at Feldheimer, who was softly swearing as he tried to light his cigarette. The dry tobacco caught fire slowly, then suddenly fell apart, crackling and hissing like defective fireworks. The doctor threw the cigarette to the ground.

‘Of course they are silent. Do you want to know their thoughts? You can’t! You know all about them: who their fathers and grandfathers were, what class background, whether they took part in the 1919 revolution or just tacitly supported it or possibly opposed it. You even know what schools they went to, when they lost their virginity, whether they like or dislike Aunt Aranka, whether they like intercourse from in front or behind, whether they prefer their *lecho* with eggs or without. All this is waiting in the files, but their thoughts, old man. . . . Everything, but not that, ever. Man’s last refuge is silence, Zoltan Zoltanovich. Would it be good to climb into their skulls, to tape their thoughts, to sniff out the secrets hiding in their bowels, all that final evidence of character which is the justification and redemption of our solitude, which makes us able to face destruction? It would be good to know, wouldn’t it, Zoltan Zoltanovich? Well, no! You direct our every move, conquer the world, but this small nook here behind my forehead you will never get under surveillance; you won’t map it, tack a file number on it, slip it into a safe; you won’t chew on it and spit it out, because . . .’ He broke off, panting, perspiring.

Zoltan was spellbound. Feldheimer’s words pointed decidedly, inexorably toward destruction. He couldn’t stammer out a single word. Had his strength and conviction left him or was he just a coward? ‘It’s no use talking with you,’ he finally said in a thin voice, a certain strange compassion in his heart. ‘Is vomitting words all you can do?’

Feldheimer smiled unexpectedly. His dry, hate-choked face smoothed out; the wrinkles dissolved. ‘You know,’ he said suddenly, and his voice had an unfamiliar pleasant ring, as if it were not even he who was talking, ‘you know, there was once a composer named Rossini. You’re familiar with him. Well, naturally, everyone is. *Figaro qui . . . Figaro là*—that sort of thing. Pure rhythm, song, grace, charm. Well, this gentleman, when he got to be around forty, simply stopped composing. He had enough—of success and everything. After that, all he did was eat. *Tournedos à la Rossini*. Later—he might have been

about sixty—they asked him to do a requiem. Sombre, funereal. Verdi. Brahms. But Rossini? The idea haunted the old man, though. What do you think, did he compose it? He certainly tried. When he died, they found among his things a sheet from the requiem score. To be precise, the only page he wrote. A requiem? It was like a gay outing—all melody, dancing, bright laughter. *Allegretto. Molto vivace*. And there was a note at the bottom of the page: "Forgive me, Lord—this is all I know." Well, there you have it. Forgive me, Party, this is all I know. Forgive me, Zoltan Zoltanovich, forgive me, everyone; this is all I know. . . . Hmm, I'd better get going—my patients must have grown beards by now.'

Zoltan stared after him as if he had been slapped. The hall was still; there was none of the usual morning bustle. What time was it, anyway? Or did it matter? He sat completely drained in the armchair. He heard the hum of the elevator, saw the door open and the old operator look out, then close it quickly. He was left to himself again.

A strong, pleasing smell of coffee came down the corridor. Zoltan got up and, as if trying to balance on a strangely tipping swing, started slowly, hesitantly, toward the snack bar.

He hoped that Judi, that short, plump girl with her blue-black hair in a thick bun, wasn't on duty today. She always looked at Zoltan as if all he had to do was say the word. But Judi wasn't there; only Bereznay and a gynecologist named Farkas, whom he barely knew, and Judi's relief at the espresso machine, Mrs. Volkovich. An elderly peroxide blonde with black-rimmed glasses, she beamed at the sight of Zoltan and welcomed him with the most flirtatious wink she could muster at her age.

'A strong double?' she asked. 'Really strong one, Comrade Party Secretary?'

'Please,' said Zoltan glumly.

Mrs. Volkovich pressed double the permitted amount of coffee into the holder; and dexterously set it in place on the machine. A little cheating didn't count. Not only did it improve the coffee, but in the tin box under the counter it swelled her jealously guarded treasure: coffee grounds. There was a brisk demand for once-used coffee grounds on the black market—she couldn't collect as much as she could have sold daily.

'Is it good?' she asked Zoltan, her head tilted wryly.

Zoltan looked up, startled. A face loomed before him, an

unknown, distant human face. Who was this woman? It struck him that he had never called her by name. Comrade Volkovich sounded so strange—it stuck in his throat even before he could say it—yet he couldn't call her by her first name either, as almost all the others did. He seemed to remember hearing some talk about her late lawyer husband, about a town house in a fashionable district, about a chauffeur-driven Mercedes which had once taken her around to expensive dress shops. Was it true? Perhaps he should have spoken with her, Zoltan thought; who knew how she lived, alone, without relatives and friends? Pity suddenly overcame him. Try as he might, he couldn't resist a half-prickly, half-slimy sentimentality about her. He was a peasant and she a has-been gentry woman. He felt guilty, for he identified pity with weakness and class treason, but he also felt an incomprehensible little yearning, like a foreign body in live flesh.

His eyes again met hers and she returned his glance with the faint superiority of understanding and forgiveness. Zoltan caught her look, but too late: the sincere interest that had flashed from behind her tired smile, the sad pride veiling her humiliation, were now another missed opportunity. Shame spread in him. Oh, to jump up and rush away! But he remained seated, went on stirring his coffee, his head bowed. 'Splendid,' he said hoarsely. 'This coffee is really . . .'

On his way out he beckoned to Bereznay. The surgeon stood up obligingly and rushed to join him at the door. 'At your service, my dear Party Secretary.'

Zoltan cut him short. 'Say, Bereznay, did you know that the Old Man still isn't . . .?' Why did he ask?

'Nothing to worry about,' say Bereznay, even more ingratiatingly. 'Our professor is probably constipated. Perhaps a touch of cystitis. Oh, excuse me, my coffee is getting cold.' And he hurried back to the table, trailing his white coat like wings.

Zoltan walked out the door. If they won't talk, they won't talk. To hell with what they think. 'Your opinion does not interest me,' Karolinszky had said. 'You're afraid of medicine.' I am, thought Zoltan. Could the professor be in some trouble? He went on up to his room.

The room hadn't been straightened yet. Books, magazines and papers littered the desk; the day bed was crumpled and unmade, the corner of the rag rug in shreds. But Zoltan did not care. He tossed his white gown over the back of the chair. That tightness in his throat yesterday morning, when he had found the lean, suntanned stranger waiting for him with those

supercilious questions about the possible causes of C-17's coronary thrombosis, no longer baffled him. It was anxiety—a classic case of depressive neurosis, Zoltan announced out loud.

Through the open window a pleasant, moist breeze flowed. On a chestnut branch a cocky little bird balanced inquisitively. How long, thought Zoltan, since I've seen a robin. He and Feri had caught one once and stuck it in a home-made cage; the next day the bird had died. Mournfully they had buried it in the yard beneath a half-dried-out plum tree. The bird on the chestnut branch shook its head in protest. I didn't mean you, Zoltan muttered; how could I confuse a thrush with a robin? I want to think of the robin now, of Feri, of the plum tree, of the garden slope, of the creek which, a few miles down, quietly trickled into Lake Balaton. Nobody can keep me from thinking about the robin or anything else, nobody in the whole world. . . . Nobody? He looked yearningly out of the window. The thrush had vanished. Zoltan shrank into the armchair behind the desk. Karolinszky, he thought. The faucet in his washbasin dripped annoyingly, but he didn't even feel like getting up and turning it off.

I ought to phone the District Committee, he thought. What for? He knew the answer in advance. 'We must squelch fear-mongering,' Geza Matyas, the Committee Secretary, would say in his deep but nasal voice, 'We must explain to the workers, patiently and perseveringly, that fraternizing with the enemy . . .' What must be explained to the workers? 'Reaction strikes where resistance is weakest, Comrades. In our district, among the petty-bourgeois of Buda, the soil is fertile. We haven't seen you at our Party Secretary meetings for quite some time now, Comrade Zoltan. Anything wrong?' Nothing, fumed Zoltan to himself; how can I answer your clichés? Then Geza Matyas would nod benignly. 'Take it from me, I'm an old hand. When we organized the strike at Csepel in thirty-two . . .' Zoltan couldn't get angry at this well-meaning old worker—but to ask him for advice? Or anybody? Beyond his door, out in the sultry, quiet halls, in the moaning wards, the buzzing laboratories, and even beyond the hospital walls, in the streets, the districts, the town, the country, something was happening—something quite independent of him, on which he no longer had any influence, which he could not direct or change whether he sat here in his room or rushed around the hospital, whether he asked questions or not; something was happening somewhere, to someone. He yearned to understand,

accept, but it kept escaping his embrace like a lover fallen out of love, resisting his thoughts, opposing his emotions and . . . A diamond-sharp fear had sloughed off its shell of numb anxiety and sprung to independent life: fear of the incalculable and the unknown, of the fatally approaching, unappealable sentence which perhaps could be delayed or hastened but not avoided, because it was sure as death, weighty as a falling ax and base as a stab in the back. He pressed his fists against his temples to stop their throbbing, to end the conflict between revolt and surrender, but it was hopeless.

On another floor of the hospital, Dr. Miklos Farkas, a gynecologist who had been transferred there from Szeged two weeks ago, was struggling with a decision of his own: whether this was the right time to make a formal call on the Party Secretary. Every day since he had arrived at the hospital he had postponed the visit which was prescribed by Party protocol. Farkas was a long-time Party member, but he still felt ill at ease when talking to comrades of proletarian or peasant background—and he knew Zoltan was one of them. It was a mixture of envy and anger, envy of those with whose origin he could never hope to compete and anger at his parents, especially his father, who was incapable of understanding historic necessity. He grieved that he must hate his father, but he felt it was his duty to the Party. His harshness, his coldness were like a dagger he had plunged into the heart of his own past, knowing that only a death struggle would make it possible for him to start a new life. He had no greater wish than to win acceptance from those blessed with humble birth, to make them forget, or at least forgive, the castle at Martonhaz. That was why he worked in the clinic's Party organization night and day; that was why he made the rounds of the nearby farms, staged Party rallies, argued, debated, orated. And if from time to time he seemed to glimpse the face of his mother, whom he had not seen now for more than a year, always in the setting of the garden at Martonhaz, among the bright glass globes and long-bearded clay dwarfs, in the shadow of the rose arbor as she called him to supper, above her blonde hair the bright summer-evening sky, behind her the endless plains—his heart leaped and tightened, but he sternly exorcised the image: such sentimental nonsense was not for a Communist. . . . But was he indeed a Communist?

It seemed so. Four weeks ago, in Szeged, he had been summoned unexpectedly by Comrade Jellinek, the county

committee's First Secretary, a flaming-haired, egg-faced Budapest worker who had headed the county committee for only a few months, yet was already famed for his strictness, his intransigence. The call was for twelve noon. Nervous and queasy, he hastily canceled that morning's tennis game and left the clinic a half hour earlier than necessary. For a while he had walked along the Tisza embankment, staring at the slow-heaving, dirty gray water; he then turned into the Hungaria Café and downed a glass of lukewarm beer. His nervousness slowly swelled into fear. If it were just a question of his actual faults or missteps—like that damned abortion—it might not be so bad. But what if Jellinek came up with some piece of slander from a colleague, a patient, an acquaintance or someone he didn't even know? There could be no defense against that; the more a man tried to clear himself, the more involved he got. They all know who I am, how I work; surely they wouldn't believe just anybody's vicious accusation. But since he hated to lie, and especially hated those who lied to themselves, he had to admit that he feared this impossible possibility most.

Jellinek had received him at once, which was a good sign. According to the grapevine, Uncle Leo, chairman of the city council, had had to cool his heels for half an hour before he was admitted. 'Have a seat, Comrade Farkas,' Jellinek had said pompously, his thick-veined fingers grubbed in his flaming hair. 'It's been a long time. I haven't had a chance to tell you how much we enjoyed your lecture on the problems of philosophy.' He lit a cigarette. Farkas breathed a bit easier, and, indeed, after a few moments, he felt like shouting and dancing around the room. But he had just sat there, glowing modestly in the shower of praise. 'Your progress is excellent,' declared Jellinek, as if summing up at a Party committee meeting, and his tone sounded even a shade more ceremonious. 'Your Party work is faultless, your relations with the other comrades exemplary, your ideological training top-notch. True,' he added, more forgivingly than reproachfully, 'there is something in your attitude—something that reminds me of the old world, of that so-called gentlemen's era when people like me were coughing up coal dust and blood. I am saying this frankly, since you, Comrade Farkas, deserve to be told to your face. Who hasn't faults? Being men, we all have. But Bolsheviks are not like ordinary men—from whom we indeed can learn a lot, but whom we must also teach—because they are the first to see their own faults. And you, Comrade Farkas,

have recognized your faults, so there is every hope that in the future you will snuff out the last remnants of your upper-class outlook.' He had got up and held out his hand. 'Allow me, Comrade, to be the first to congratulate you on a great honor deriving from our Party's trust in you.' For quite a while the doctor could not get over his surprise. That was how he had learned of his transfer to the Cold Valley Road Hospital.

But his loneliness, his sense of isolation at the hospital, was troubling. He would go to see Zoltan now. With all the rumors flying around the hospital, it might be just the right day. Putting down his coffee, Farkas walked out to a deserted nurses' station and picked up the telephone. He was, after all, a Communist.

The phone rang shrilly. How grateful Zoltan was for that, how grateful! He grabbed the receiver; at last he'd find out what was happening. An unfamiliar voice spoke. It was Farkas, the gynecologist, with whom he had come in contact only once or twice at the hospital. In a thin, tight voice Farkas said he had to see Zoltan at once. What about? He'd tell him in person; couldn't say over the phone. 'Come up to my room,' Zoltan answered reluctantly. 'Do you know where it is?' Farkas knew. The Party Secretary put down the receiver and began pacing from wall to wall, carefully avoiding the papers on the floor. What could this fellow, whom he faintly recalled as being disagreeable, possibly want?

But Farkas was not at all unpleasant, Zoltan had to admit after a few minutes of conversation. True, his deep-blue eyes held a sort of cool reserve and his clipped speech conveyed that *savoir-faire*, that superiority common to those who have grown up amidst affluence; but all this was not offensive—instead, rather winning. From this well-groomed, lean, supple body, beneath whose discipline lay a love and knowledge of pleasure, there seemed to flow a directed energy, a live force held in check but ready to leap forth. Everything else about him was normal—perhaps too normal; maybe this was what got on Zoltan's nerves: the neatly pressed white coat, the freshly laundered silk shirt and well-knotted dark-gray tie, the fine, longish face, glistening wavy brown hair, ears set close to the skull, the bony, sensitive fingers that he often clasped.

'Forgive me for breaking in on you like this,' Farkas began. 'I've been planning to drop by for several days but I haven't had a chance. May I?' He took a cigarette from a little leather case which he then held out to Zoltan. 'Will you have one?'

'Thanks,' said Zoltan. Why does he ask my permission to smoke? He detected all those social forms.

'I suppose my transfer file has already arrived,' Farkas went on calmly. His voice too was different from the way it had sounded on the phone, a pleasant, manly baritone.

'No, it hasn't come,' said Zoltan uneasily.

'Our comrades in Szeged take things a bit too easy,' said the gynecologist. 'I left word at the Party office . . .'

Zoltan recalled that a package had arrived from Szeged, but he hadn't had the time nor the inclination to open it. Now he became curious; who could this man be?

'I'll look into it,' said Zoltan. Suddenly he was furious with Farkas and shifted his glance out the window where gray clouds were swirling above the green slope.

'Please do,' said Farkas. 'I shouldn't like to be left out of Party life here because of their inefficiency in Szeged. As a matter of fact, I conducted a Party seminar there. If you think I could be useful here too, please let me know.' As if reading Zoltan's mind, he continued, 'Meanwhile I'd like you to know that I joined the Party in 'forty-five—before that I'd been with the underground organization at the university. I should add, though . . .'

Zoltan suddenly melted. Why had he felt inimical toward the man? They had never talked before. Farkas was apparently an old Communist; he had been in the Party longer than he had himself. He felt ashamed and tried to smile pleasantly.

'I should add'—Farkas leaned slightly forward in his chair and rested his chin on his clasped hands—'that in a way I'm a traitor to my class.' He laughed. 'My parents were landowners; my father was a member of Parliament. I feel obliged to inform you of this,' he declared sternly. The self-irony had vanished from his tone. 'We had five hundred acres,' Farkas went on. 'My parents were relocated two years ago.'

Zoltan knew it was wrong but he could not hold back his rage. Five hundred acres? The honorable member was orating in Parliament while my father grubbed the soil with a bony mare at Kajar. This well-groomed body sitting in front of him carried memories of a rich, carefree childhood in every cell and nerve; the cool reserve, the self-assurance were built on generations of absolute command, built on the misery of the peasants, built on the security of life behind closed shuttered enveloped by the fragrance of fine tobaccos. Now Zoltan understood the reason for his irritation. He, the peasant lad, had sniffed out yesterday's oppressor, the Athletic Club gentle-

man on his frisky thoroughbred, the delicate swish of a whip. How did this fellow ever connect with the Communist Party?

'But this isn't the reason I wanted to talk to you,' said Farkas. 'You can read it all in my dossier. I'm sorry about it, but, after all, I didn't choose my father.'

Zoltan felt a flush mount in his face. Farkas was speaking frankly, with a slight sadness in his tone but without any sign of retreat. I'm a fool, thought Zoltan; to hell with my petty feelings. It's true that we're a class party, but should we reject those who have recognized the march of history and joined us because they believe in . . . In what?

'Your past is your affair,' said Zoltan gruffly. Why was he so hostile? 'We are all comrades in the Party,' he added placatingly. 'Please tell me why you came.'

'Of course.' Farkas looked straight into Zoltan's eyes. 'Please don't misunderstand me, Comrade Zoltan, but I feel bound to report my observations. Since I've been here only two weeks, you may well think my observations are based on very limited experience, but I can't help noticing things. Dr. Bereznay, for example, is an obvious reactionary. That's clear—crystal clear—and this business about Professor Karolinszky . . .'

'What do you know about Karolinszky?' said the Party Secretary nervously.

'Nothing,' the gynecologist replied. 'That is, no more than everyone knows about him. That he is a fine doctor and—to be tactful—that he isn't exactly friendly toward our Party and our People's Democracy, but now——'

Zoltan interrupted him again. 'Do you know him?'

'No,' replied the other. 'I haven't even met him yet. In the old days before the war, my father used to meet him on the estate of a family friend, Endre Zibolen, but I was never there for various reasons which aren't relevant now. But it was not about the professor that I wanted to speak to you.'

'What about, then?' Zoltan began to pace the room. He simply could not stand Farkas' precise way of talking.

'About the atmosphere I found here this morning, which, in my modest opinion, can in no sense be regarded as healthy.' His voice showed sincere concern. 'I hear rumors wherever I go. People put their heads together, whisper, argue; I hear Karolinszky's name in every corner. And I don't like that, Comrade Zoltan.'

'You don't? And can you tell me what they are whispering about?' Zoltan tensed; now perhaps he'd find out.

'You know as well as I do,' said the gynecologist. 'That he has been arrested. That he was taken away last night. That this morning they packed him off to the Soviet Union. And so on.' Zoltan bowed his head. So that was it. 'Yet the simple fact that Karolinszky is late,' Farkas went on, 'doesn't justify such conclusions. Why, then, are people saying these things? In whose interest is it that the hospital should buzz with disturbing rumors? The enemy's, obviously. And if this is so, as it is, then our prime duty as Communists is to meet this maneuver and unmask it. Do you agree?' ('Right,' said Jellinek firmly. 'The comrade has again shown that the trust reposed in him...')

Zoltan sat up straight in the chair. 'I do,' he said softly. He felt no gratitude, though he knew Farkas deserved it; only envy and a kind of glowering, fearful distaste.

'Back in Szeged, if I may say so, they did things differently.'

'So?' It was hard for Zoltan to restrain his irritation. 'Differently?'

'I don't mean to mix in your affairs—but yes, differently.' He adjusted his tie, which didn't need it; his voice rang superior and sure: 'The Party leadership would have met. We would have called summary meetings, Party group meetings. Gossip can be silenced by swift action, Comrade Zoltan. One must take the offensive....' He went on, speaking fluently, calmly.

Zoltan was scarcely listening any more. There he was, sitting right in front of him, the man he had been waiting for so long: a Communist whose heart and mind were in the right place, who thought as he did, wanted just what he did; who could stand beside him in the void and share his burdens. The helping hand, the friend. He ought to be grateful, he ought to leap up and embrace him, and yet ... He knew that everything Farkas had said was true. He knew he had made a mistake and should have done what Farkas advised hours ago; he accepted the criticism and condemned his own sickly doubts and indecision, yet he simply could not free himself from the cold, choking coils of distrust. Why? What had Farkas called Bereznay? An obvious reactionary. Clear—crystal clear. That was the clue. Farkas' truth was not his truth after all, and perhaps wasn't even the truth—just a blueprint, the skeleton shorn of the flesh, a simplified grayish smear drawn from life's bright swirl, a bad textbook illustration. Zoltan felt much closer to Bereznay the reactionary than to this dapper glib revolutionary, this immaculate Communist whose zeal, brains, measured elegance and very rightness simply aroused his suspicion.

Farkas had fallen silent. He rose now from the chair, his whole body suddenly looking heavy and burdensome. Zoltan knew that the gynecologist felt defeated, but he had no desire to relieve him or to stop him from leaving, and he barely acknowledged Farkas' diffident little bow from the doorway.

Zoltan went immediately to the safe and opened it. Yes, here was the Szeged dispatch, wrapped in brown paper, carefully tied up and sealed; on the outside, his name in big splintery letters, plus the notation **STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL**. He opened it and sat down at his desk. Ordinarily he would have read the new file reluctantly, because he took no pleasure in probing the private affairs of others (this was the source of his running debate with his State Security contact, the little blue-eyed lieutenant) but now his irritation overcame any sense of embarrassment or shyness. A warm sense of power and secret knowledge suffused him. It was good to know that he was of the elect, sharing in a great paternal trust, and that even his distrust strengthened the cause on which he had staked his life.

On top were a few routine documents, then a long autobiography in a fine hand. This he quickly leafed through. Farkas' lies did not interest him. The county committee cadre chief's opinion promised more. This report stressed Miklos Farkas' Party loyalty but took particular note of the doctor's bourgeois leanings and listed them in detail. To begin with, it described his manner of dress (he wore only white silk shirts), emphasizing that this was only a *phenomenon* symptomatic of a deeper essence. The report did not expand on the nature of this 'deeper essence,' apparently leaving that to the imagination and ideological maturity of the reader. Zoltan thought it was a stupid point. But the next comment touched on the doctor's passion for sports and noted his predilection for tennis and skiing (the two words underlined in red), his being expert in both these upper-class (red pencil) pastimes, which was no accident (red pencil). He next came upon a report from the Szeged branch of the State Security Authority. The report stated that on December 16, 1951, at three P.M., Dr. Miklos Farkas in all probability had performed an illegal operation on Terez Pallay, employee of the Szeged National Theater, who at the time was his mistress. In support of this there were two documents (attached). One was the deposition of Miklos Farkas' housekeeper, Anna Nagy (born 1903 in Mako), stating that at the above specified time Dr. Miklos Farkas had sent her

out of the house on the pretext of various urgent purchases but that she—before entering the corner state cooperative store—saw Terez Pallay enter the house; the other was the deposition of Kornel Gut, stage manager of the Szeged National Theater, chairman of the disciplinary committee (born 1896 in Gyula, a Party member since 1919), stating that Terez Pallay was absent from rehearsals between December 16 and December 19, pleading laryngitis, and also missed an appearance in the operetta entitled *Stars of Gold* (December 17). An investigation was begun in the case but came to a halt after the deposition of Dr. Ferenc Soveny, eye, ear and throat specialist at the Clinic of Internal Medicine No. 2. Dr. Soveny swore under oath (enclosure) that at the time in question Terez Pallay did indeed have a light case of laryngitis, and any sort of performance would have endangered her voice. He supported his testimony with prescriptions dating from that period. An officer with an illegible signature noted that after Dr. Soveny's deposition he received a letter from one Simon Lazar (the county Party Committee Secretary at the time, arrested shortly afterward, on February 3, 1952) in which he asked that the investigation be suspended—and so it was. But in the opinion of the investigator, Miklos Farkas did commit the crime. Farkas had therefore been placed under constant surveillance.

Zoltan leafed on. He learned that the Party committee had honored Dr. Farkas with a citation for his fine work in preparing and staging the Szeged Peace Congress; he learned that the Szeged Party cell of the Sixth District had written the Municipal Committee to request that for the next Party Day they again send Comrade Dr. Miklos Farkas, whose last appearance had been a great success; he learned that all the students of Dr. Farkas' intermediate seminar had successfully contemplated the course, two of them having been assigned to lead elementary seminars; he learned that by unanimous decision of the County Committee's *Agitprop* branch, Dr. Farkas had been assigned to the top group in the next academic year; he learned that on February 14, 1952, Dr. Farkas had given a lecture on the theme of 'Philosophy as a form of the class struggle, with special reference to subjective idealism, one of the main currents of bourgeois science and philosophy'; he learned that...

An envelope came to light marked for the attention of Dr. Zoltan. He opened it and read a letter from Mihaly Jellinek, the County Committee's first secretary:

DEAR COMRADE SECRETARY,

Enclosed I send you the personal data and cadre analysis of Dr. Miklos Farkas, staff member of the Szeged Obstetrical Clinic No. 1. In the past months, Comrade Miklos Farkas has worked as a cadre member of our County Committee. You will receive separate notice of his certification from the clinic's local Party cell.

As First Secretary of the County Committee, I wish to call your special attention to the fact that Comrade Dr. Miklos Farkas has been a member of our Party since 1945, and as such has won recognition from the County Committee. However, the Party must regard him with Bolshevik vigilance. In the view of our Executive Committee, Comrade Farkas is not sincere. Let us not be led astray by the fact that his work is good: class aliens and Titoist agents infiltrating the Party often disguise their subversion by good work. Miklos Farkas' presence in our ranks reveals an opportunism typical of such upper bourgeois elements. What could be more indicative of this than his volunteering for all kinds of Party work, even to the extent of neglecting his medical duties? Especially to be stressed is Miklos Farkas' relations with women, which clearly reveal the moral degeneracy of his class. Of course his work and knowledge must be used in the interest of our Party's goals, but the strictest supervision is required.

With comradely greetings,

MIHALY JELLINEK

P.S. Comrade Miklos Farkas' transfer is being made on confidential and secret orders from higher Party authority.

Zoltan shoved the letter back into the envelope, disgruntled; he wrapped up the whole parcel and locked it in his safe.

CHAPTER TWENTY

When Klara walked into the small room on the fifth floor she found Zoltan lying motionless on the couch. His white jacket hung on the back of a chair; his stethoscope had dropped to the floor. His freshly shaven face was unnaturally flushed, the almond-shaped eyes glued to the ceiling as if he was trying to

solve the hieroglyphics formed by the hair-thin cracks there. His right arm hung down; an empty matchbox was caught on one of his longish fine fingers. His left arm lay across his chest, cramped into a fist. In her fright, this blanched fist grew monstrous, obscuring the thin rib cage beneath it; the stiff knuckles and rough-angled edges loomed crag-like. She stood in the draft for quite a while, oblivious to its tug at her hair, its sudden swoop into the papers on the desk. Was he asleep? But his eyes were open. Ill? She recalled that he had not stopped by to say hello as usual that morning, nor had he phoned. This spoke more plainly of growing peril than the Assistant Chief's inquiries about Karolinszky every five minutes. She stepped to the window with trembling knees.

The gleaming sunlight of the morning had vanished; rain clouds were gathering in the sky. In the open window Klara watched the massive gray swirl above the light-green shadows of Rose Hill. The storm, which shaped the clouds into formless monsters piling on top of each other, still hadn't reached the hospital. With an agreeable shudder she nestled closer into her cardigan, then went to the door. A strange sound caught her ear. Then she recognized it. The languid drip of the washbasin faucet was cutting the hush into measured segments. In her ears, the sound penetrated the slightly freckled skin, bone and cartilage, lacerating the nerve ends leading to the vault of the skull, becoming a series of shotgun blasts. Instead of impulsively tearing herself free, she stood numb and helpless in the doorway.

The rain had started.

'Can we begin?' asked the Chinaman and glanced meaningfully at the washbasin, where the faucet was dripping persistently, mercilessly. 'Can we begin?' He had a falsetto voice, like Farkas over the phone. Karolinszky stood in the far corner of the room, right by the wall, bare to the waist, his head bowed, motionless.

The room was suddenly swallowed in darkness as the storm rushed down Rose Hill toward the hospital. Lightning flashed again and again, illuminating clearly each feature of the familiar face: the black hair graying at the temples, the high, furrowed brow, the black eyes behind the fringe of jet lashes, the straight, thin nose and the cruelly thin lower lip. A dense, fuzzy armor of black hair covered his bare arms and chest; beneath it, his skin gleamed sporadically. His arms were held by two Chinamen standing stiffly in pale-green linen suits.

Now lightning forked through the window; the bolt struck the wall behind the professor, producing a long, twisting, tubelike fissure, a sort of narrow corridor which Zoltan knew led not into the building but to an unknown medium quite different from space. He also knew that it was not space which filled the few steps of distance between him and the professor, nor even time.

The Chinaman looked at him impatiently. Zoltan now saw what he wanted. A giddy, wild dread seized him, fear which in no way differed from utter rapture.

'Torture him!' rasped Zoltan without hearing his own voice.

'Torture!' echoed one of the Chinamen. He grabbed Karolinszky's raven-black hair and jerked it from his head. The professor did not move. The Chinaman threw the scalp into the void behind him, where it thumped like a rock and the hall rang cavernously with the sound. He now forced the professor's head under the faucet. Its bald surface gleamed wanly, inimically. Drops fell on the skull at measured intervals. Zoltan wanted to leap up and help the Chinamen, to join in the bliss of torture, but some impassive force which seemed to emanate from the professor nailed him to the sofa. Never before had he desired in this way—so passionately, so frightfully, with such blind violence. He wanted to torture him, to rip gaping incurable wounds in his skull, his flesh, his lungs, his stomach, his joints, his cells, deep in the body's hidden and undiscoverable soft corners where life from instant to instant fused with death. Yet, at the same time, he had never felt so drawn to him, with such tormenting love, such almost perverse devotion; never before had he felt this aching sharp desire to share the professor's trials, to learn his secrets and understand him at last, to really understand him. He hated the professor, hated his languid indifference, the cold, sly impassivity with which he had warded off the assaults of Zoltan's love, scornfully rebuffing and humiliating him, and simultaneously he loved him, feared for him, would gladly have undergone in his place the torture he himself had commanded, assuming in his stead what everyone must assume alone in solitude—yes, annihilation.

'More!' he rasped again, hoarse with pain. The faucet kept dripping. The Chinese stood motionless, their faces melting into each other. 'Go on!' Zoltan was soaking with perspiration, with slimy, mucuous dankness. Raw, wild physical pleasure mixed with pain, hate with love, fear with assurance, revelation with death. By now Zoltan understood: it was this

simultaneousness of affirmation and denial which filled the few steps between him and the professor; the lightning fissure was the professor's life, where he might have hidden like a mole burrowing into the past, for a man cannot flee elsewhere than into himself. But Karolinszky did not move; he endured the torture impassively, as if he had prepared for it and now accepted it with boredom and indifference. Zoltan groaned. Deep in the mist-gray wave that had first swept him high, then sloughed him off, glimmered a crystalized feeling of guilt for a crime he had not committed. Though he had given the command for the torture, he had had nothing to do with it, yet still he must assume responsibility.

The water kept dripping, inexorably.

Klara sat on the edge of the couch and looked at Zoltan, who lay there drenched in sweat, his eyes closed. She had tried to calm him by stroking his forehead, but he had jerked away spasmodically. She gazed in alarm at the gray, drawn face. Saliva frothed between the impressed lips; the nostrils tensed as in some final effort. She sprang to the telephone. But suddenly Zoltan opened his eyes and Klara froze in her steps. She watched his glance fall on the white wall that glimmered in the pale light of the sun emerging again after the storm; from there, his eyes slid to the washbasin, where the faucet dripped quietly. Zoltan shook himself and sat up. Klara knelt at the side of the couch and saw in the eyes she knew so well a languid, distant dread. Zoltan's face broke into a pained smile.

'I'm all right,' he said faintly. 'Everything is all right now.' He stroked Klara's deep-red hair. 'Will you please turn off that faucet.' She did not understand but rose to comply. All at once there was silence. Zoltan pressed his palms to his ears, then lifted them, as if to verify the stillness; then he lay back on the couch, one arm under his head.

'You gave me such a scare,' she said, stroking the young doctor's face. 'I thought that...'

Zoltan stared at the wall with dilated pupils. 'Has he come in yet?' he asked.

'Not yet,' said Klara softly, 'unless he's come since I left my desk. What do you think happened to him?'

'What could have happened? Not a thing. He'll come in when he wants to. Don't you know Karolinszky yet? He likes to do the unexpected. It wouldn't surprise me if he turned up in the furnace room, checking on the stokers. You'd better go back to your office,' he said roughly. 'I hate to see you lolling

here during working hours. Why that dumb look?’

Klara rose uncertainly. She’d been here before during working hours; why was he angry with her? ‘I’ll leave,’ she said. ‘Don’t be angry that I came up, my sweet. It’s all so stupid. What can I do? Everyone phones me and pretends not to know anything but they know everything.’

‘They know everything?’

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘they say all sorts of things, even if they don’t tell you.’ She stepped closer to the doctor, but he turned away gruffly.

‘Did they tell you?’

‘No,’ she replied after a moment of hesitation, ‘nothing. These days nobody tells me anything.’ She felt a faint anger now herself and it frightened her.

‘So they used to . . .’ Zoltan snapped at her.

‘Yes, they used to,’ she said and started to leave. The doctor jerked her back by the shoulder. ‘When?’

‘Before . . . before you began giving me dictation,’ she lashed out at him. ‘Do you think they don’t know about us?’

‘So they know,’ he said dryly. ‘What of it? What did they used to tell you?’

‘I’ll tell you later,’ she replied and tried to free her shoulder. ‘You’re hurting me. Let go.’

‘Tell me now. Right now.’

‘Must I?’ she asked. ‘Come on, take it easy.’

The doctor let go of her shoulder, almost shoved her away. ‘Answer my question! What did they used to tell you?’ Klara felt that all of a sudden her face had become ugly. Her eyes had turned into bugs, her smooth white brow had erupted in angry pimples. ‘Well . . .’ Klara made a last attempt to calm Zoltan’s baffling anger. She put a hand on his arm affectionately, but the doctor stepped back. She felt her face flame at this second rebuff.

‘Everything! Everything!’ The words came from her throat in a thin screech.

‘Fine,’ said the doctor. ‘Perfect. Go on.’

‘What more can I say?’ she replied wanly. ‘They told me everything that no one tells you—about Karolinszky, about the hospital, and that they fear you. Do you understand? They’re afraid . . .’ She broke off in dread and held on tightly to the door jamb. Around her she felt the surge of an unknown force against which there was no defence.

‘They’re afraid,’ repeated Zoltan with acid scorn. ‘The innocents, the darlings. Do you think I don’t know that the whole

building is buzzing with rumors? He's vanished. They've thrown him in jail. He's been killed.' Zoltan looked up suddenly. 'Well, I'll have you know—and you can tell your friends, too—that in this country we don't go around dragging off innocent people. Of course there are those who deserve it, like some of your friends, and they can shake in their boots for all I care. If you believe those stupid gossipers instead of me, then I don't know what to do with you. . . . Why the despair? Yesterday you couldn't have given a damn about him, and now you're all tearing your hair out because he's a few minutes late.' He paused.

Klara turned away, not even wanting to look at this man she did not understand. But she wasn't angry at him; she just wondered at the strange and in no way painful void which now filled her whole body, a sighing devotion.

Zoltan took a deep breath. 'That's how it is,' he said then. 'Do you see?' There was no sense to the question, and Klara saw that the fire had suddenly flickered out in him; there was no more nourishment for it. 'That's how it is,' she heard him say.

'I don't understand,' she answered. 'But it doesn't matter. The main thing is that you do.' She felt no anger now, having sensed that the force which a moment ago had nearly downed her was now rushing at Zoltan, and she could only look on helpless as he drifted from her. He was struggling hard, bobbing in the overwhelming current that churned between them, sweeping memories, desires, passions on its foaming crest, but he could not bear up against it. No one could, she thought, and what sense was there even to try? She glanced at her wrist watch. 'Nearly ten-fifteen,' she said absently. 'You're not angry, are you? I must go. I've got so much to do.' She had almost reached the stairs when Zoltan's husky voice caught up with her.

'Wait a minute.' What could he want? But it didn't matter. Zoltan was far away; his face had shrunk to a small gray point. 'Would you do something for me?'

'Certainly,' she replied.

'Please send someone to Karolinszky's house.' His voice broke indecisively, then picked up strength. 'A charwoman. Anyone. Say that I'd like to see him.'

Klara felt Zoltan's cold glance on her back but didn't turn, as if afraid she might become a pillar of salt. She drew the light-blue cardigan around her shoulders. She was cold.

Mama Fekete, the old charwoman, was still hunched, shivering, outside the director's office, just as Klara had left her then when she had rushed out. Meanwhile, many people had come by, asking questions, making jokes—but she didn't let herself be bothered by this and ignored the questions. On seeing Klara, she respectfully stood up. Klara quickly told her where she had to go. She nodded, trudged down to the charwomen's dressing room in the basement and put on the frayed, dark-gray coat she had been given more than ten years ago by her employer, a pretty, young, good-humored Jewish woman. 'Aunt Lenke, this will last you for the next hundred years,' the young woman had said to her, laughing. Maybe so, thought Mama Fekete. The woman had been taken away by the Germans.

'To the professor,' she said dutifully at the main gate, 'sent by Comrade Klara.' Vincze saluted smartly, as in his Red soldier days.

Klara stood at the window in the professor's office. The storm had passed and the sun shone. From Rose Hill a pleasant, mild breeze was blowing. She watched the old charwoman stumble down the slope. From above no one could tell how scared she was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

'And Tito, Comrade Gortvai . . . what do you think of Tito?' the woman asked engagingly. She kept her head slightly tilted. She was wearing a coffee-brown tweed suit of British cut, with a high-necked Russian blouse of raw silk. At times her blonde hair would fall over her white forehead. The gray mouse-eyes now narrowed capably, now widened with interest. Her short, stumpy fingers fiddled with a broken-pointed pencil.

Gortvai stifled a yawn. 'Tito,' he said with instant glibness, 'is a foe of our people's democracy, an agent of American imperialism. . . .' Where have I seen that face? His searching glance slid along the squat, lithe figure running to plumpness, the fattish calves swathed in dark silk stockings, the flat-heeled shoes. Pleasant girl, he noted; hasn't crossed her legs in an hour and a half.

'And his aims?' she asked, encouraging.

'His aims . . . ' Gortvai repeated.

'Simple,' she said benignly. 'You must have read a good deal about that, Comrade.'

Yes, I must have, thought the young man. Time we got to the point—if there is any point, good God. He made a show of rapt attention as she rattled off Tito's aims, but his mind was roaming.

For more than two hours he'd sat in this richly furnished room. After he had waited there half an hour the woman had entered briskly, greeted him briskly, inquired briskly about his health. Gortvai felt fine. She was glad. Then, carefully placing on the table the pink folder she had brought along, she politely asked the young man if he would permit her one or two essentially insignificant—essentially insignificant, she stressed—questions. Gortvai began to speak. In the past few years he had so often written or told the brief story of his eventless life that there was hardly need to watch his words; they poured from him. His life, once jealously his alone, had lost all savor and intent, become public domain; raw, exciting reality had changed to a gray, flat, dutifully rounded *biography* with warily planned turns and warily weighed omissions (by now all he had was what he left out). And behind the words lurked a perpetual fear of Freudian slips, absent-mindedness (which would create conflicts between this and earlier biographies), the interviewer's mood, his own mood, today's domestic situation, tomorrow's international situation, this whole hostile world, all forming a judgment of him beyond appeal. Gortvai stared mesmerized at the pink folder. The verdict, thought the young man with a start: reports from himself, from Vilma Holcz, from Mrs. Mickecz, from Lautenburg, from the janitor, from the manager of the Poppy night club, from acquaintances, from friends, from enemies, from those still free, from those no longer so, reports . . .

'Tea, sandwiches, Comrade Gortvai? Or some fruit perhaps?' Gortvai wasn't hungry. He stirred his tea uneasily. From the tray the woman took a round pink-cheeked apple and bit into it with gusto, her keen, pointed mouse-teeth tearing sharply at the soft flesh of the apple. Gortvai shuddered. The poster, he thought suddenly, the poster! That was where he had seen her face. Between the happy worker in blue overalls and the still happier intellectual in the white dust coat, a tractor girl beamed into the planned future, wearing a blue polka-dot babushka over her blonde hair. Behind them the rising

sun gilded the bright-red roof of the make-believe cottage on the small farm, the deep-green make-believe meadow, the three make-believe poplars. *Vote for the People's Front!* The discovery depressed Gortvai.

'A certain Endre Zibolen,' said the woman at this point with unusual sharpness. 'Do you remember the name, Comrade?'

The blow hit him with terrific force in the nape of the neck. He crashed to the ground. Grains of sand grated on his teeth and his mouth filled with a salty mixture of blood and tears. The schoolyard reeled. The stunted lilacs squatted shiveringly on the skyline; beneath them in the dusty air a soccer ball sailed by a dirty, waning moon. 'Did you say I lied?' panted a narrow, angular mouth close above him. 'Say it again!' The mouth leaned closer, grew, expanded, disintegrated. 'Do you hear me? Repeat that I lied.'

'A certain Endre Zibolen,' said the woman firmly. 'Comrade, please answer my question.'

The schoolyard tipped back to its original plane. The boy struggled to his feet and wiped his face. His neck throbbed; his mouth was full of blood; he spat. Class 7-B circled him like a wolf pack ready to pounce. 'You didn't lie, Zibolen,' said Gortvai in a subdued voice. 'You weren't offside.'

'He was a classmate of mine,' he said then, his eyes on the great Persian rug at his feet, glowing in shades of blue-violet. Worth about twenty thousand forints, he thought. Who could they have requisitioned it from?

The woman looked past Gortvai. 'We know that,' she said coldly. The smile fell off his face, fell to the ground and broke into clattering fragments. Gortvai closed his eyes. 'We know that,' pressed the woman. 'Indeed, we know the life story of Endre Zibolen from A to Z.'

Behind his closed eyelids, the low, squat female went through an indefinable change. Her body suddenly began to shrink and waste away. The blonde hair grayed. The healthy pink skin dried out and cracked. She had become quite tiny; only her eyes shone, like two small boring points.

'We also know,' she continued, her voice booming as if it came from underwater, 'that Mr. Zibolen maintained close friendship with you, Comrade Gortvai. Isn't that so?'

Gortvai would have liked to protest, loudly and vehemently. But by now he too was under the water, which rose swiftly about him with a hissing swirl as if somewhere far away they had opened the sluices. 'Not at all,' he said hoarsely. 'Please believe me, it's just slander.' Are they trying to prove that I

helped him defect? he thought, terrified.

'Slander,' repeated the mouse with emphasis. 'So it's slander.'

'I haven't seen Zibolen since graduation,' said Gortvai, gasping for breath. 'The day after the graduation, I came up to the university and he stayed in Ladany on his father's estate. As you know they were big landowners. Reactionaries.'

'Very interesting.'

'There's really nothing interesting about it,' said Gortvai, leaning forward a bit. 'Zibolen beat up everybody. He chased the servants with a whip. He was seen doing it,' he added for emphasis. Don't be mad at me, Zibolen, thought Gortvai. What can a man do? I have no poison with me, Zibolen, forgive me.

'And you haven't seen him since?'

'Believe me,' said Gortvai uncertainly, 'you must believe me.' Submerged at the bottom, he struggled among other sprawled bodies, motionless and rigid in the silt of memory. There lay Gustave Oloffson with his gold pince-nez, in his hands a bunch of uncorrected math papers. There lay Napoleon Ungvari, who always rejected learning by rote. There lay Charlotte Feldman, who was in love with Zibolen. There lay Endre Zibolen. Around his narrow, angular mouth a faint smile formed.

'And the jeep?' asked the mouse.

'Jeep?' cried Gortvai, startled. 'What jeep do you mean?' Suddenly Zibolen sat up. The slime dripped from his face slowly. 'Don't you remember the jeep, Gortvai?' he said maliciously. 'Shut up, Zibolen,' hissed Gortvai. 'It's easy for you in New York or wherever the hell you are. But they can kill me here.'

'I don't remember any jeep.'

'Surprising,' said the woman in Zibolen's voice. 'Surprising how weak Comrade Gortvai's memory ...'

Surprising thought Gortvai, that I can remember anything at all. The waters billowed dangerously about him. He was silent.

'Because,' she said, poking the pencil at Gortvai, 'we possess information indicating that Comrade Gortvai ...'

It had been an early-spring day, unpredictable, April. Gortvai was living in a furnished room. The doorbell rang and Zibolen was standing at the door in high-laced boots, hatless. He grinned. 'Don't be afraid,' he said lightly. 'I won't beat you up any more.' 'What do you want?' grumbled Gortvai. He was preparing for exams; didn't like being disturbed. His life was

quite filled at that point with coal-tar derivatives. 'I'm off to Ladany,' said Zibolen. 'Thought you might like to come along since it's your home town.' 'Come on in,' said Gortvai. They sat down in the cramped, airless room. Zibolen sniffed. 'What a stink.' 'Nobody asked you to come,' snapped Gortvai. 'All-right, all right, calm down. Listen ...'

At that time Zibolen was working for the American Mission of the Allied Control Commission, on procurement. 'Good job,' said Zibolen with a wink. 'They pay in dollars, Chesterfields, all the food you can eat.' 'What's it to me?' asked Gortvai. 'Let's get down to brass tacks,' said Zibolen with a flick of his hand. 'I want to live in your house down there.' 'What?' snorted Gortvai. 'Take it easy,' said Zibolen. 'There's room, isn't there?' 'Yes,' said Gortvai, wondering. 'But why in the world ...' Zibolen lit a Chesterfield. The fragrant smoke rose. 'Well, in 'forty-four my old man ...' He grimaced. 'Don't you know?' Gortvai didn't. 'They skipped,' said Zibolen, 'the whole pack.' 'Why didn't you go too?' asked Gortvai suspiciously. Zibolen grinned again. 'I'm not that stupid. Leave now, when a guy can stuff himself on dollars? There'll be enough time to get out later.' He mumbled something. 'Will you go to Ladany with me?' He held out his hand. After that Gortvai went on two other occasions as well, by jeep, an American jeep—good God ...

Gortvai had not lied when he said that he didn't remember a jeep, but now the image of it shot crackling out from the coils of his memory with a rush of blood and a hum in his ears. He strove frantically to tear free, but felt each move entangling him further in the net whose glinting strands dragged him down, down.

'The comrade doubtless will understand our concern ...'

'I understand,' Gortvai hastened to say, 'of course I understand. Surely you don't think I don't understand? I have nothing to do with this Zibolen. As a true Socialist ...' Wearily he broke off. The crackling, whirring hum ceased just then. Soft, sleepy rays of afternoon sunlight swished into the room, which at once regained its pristine form: the tables, the armchairs, the puffy Picasso peace dove facing it, all became palpable components of the actual world. In this bright reality, Gortvai, who had been wrestling a minute ago with the ghosts of the subconscious, now saw the trap.

'Actually,' said the woman, barring appeal, 'the American imperialist spy network ...'

Gortvai moaned helplessly. 'No!' he cried. 'No, no.'

'Unfortunately,' said the woman. 'As a matter of fact it has been established——'

'On my word,' gasped Gortvai, 'my word of honor, I forgot about that American jeep.'

'A pity,' said the woman with naked scorn, 'a pity.'

'My work proves——' he stumbled over his words—'my work proves...'

'I'm sorry to say,' replied the woman modestly, 'it proves nothing.'

'But yes,' persisted Gortvai. 'Please don't think I wish to contradict you, but I must state that my work——'

'As a matter of fact,' said the woman and smiled again for the first time in a long while, 'as a matter of fact, Endre Zibolen has confessed his close association with Comrade Gortvai.'

Madness, thought Gortvai. What did Zibolen confess? It's three years since he got away—or maybe four? 'There's some mistake,' he cut in, somewhat more calmly. 'I'm sure there's some mistake. As far as I know, four years ago Endre Zibolen...'

The woman smiled again, superciliously. 'Unfortunately, Comrade Gortvai, you are misinformed. As a matter of fact, Endre Zibolen...'

As a matter of fact, thought Gortvai, if she says that once more!

'As a matter of fact, Endre Zibolen only *tried* to flee the fist of the People's Democracy.' The fist, thought Gortvai: it's the end. A narrow, angular mouth leaned over him. 'Are you calling me a liar, Gortvai?' 'Yes,' Gortvai hissed, 'of course you're lying. Do you think I won't say it this time? Offside. You fled. What became of you, Zibolen?'

'He was hanged,' said the woman.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Aliz scurried away from the door back to her typewriter and tried to look immersed in her work. She heard footsteps in Lautenburg's office; the morning conference was apparently over. Aliz had keen ears. From the weight of the steps, the creak of the floor, the swish of the worn carpet she could

determine the direction of movement and differentiate the dull thumps of Lautenburg's solitary pacing from the stronger rhythm of those about to come out. Indeed, after a time, she also ventured to guess from the firmness or hesitance of the steps whether a meeting had been a success or a failure.

The steps now became uncertain, grew faint, then firm, as if Lautenburg and Mrs. Mikecz had stopped for a last exchange before finally breaking up; Aliz, disappointed, concluded that nothing significant had occurred and the storm she had so excitedly anticipated was either delayed or had disintegrated. A pity, she thought while typing the minutes of a directors meeting held two days earlier (one copy to the Ministry, one to the district Party committee, one for Mrs. Mikecz, one for Lautenburg's files), what a pity. She felt cheated. Was this her reward for trying so loyally to comply with Alajos Sandor's request, for scurrying to Vili Racz to report Mrs. Mikecz' betrayal, for eavesdropping at the risk of someone catching her? For the moment, it seemed as if even that dear man, Vili Racz had failed her. He had heard her through, true, but hadn't even asked her to sit down, hadn't smiled, encouraged her. His glance, which at other times could be so warm and inspiring, had flashed coldly from behind his gold-rimmed glasses. Also omitted was the once automatic little gift that Vili would take out of the locked lower drawer of his desk and present as a reward for a mission accomplished—the bar of *real* chocolate, or some such thing. Aliz had returned to her room humiliated.

But she wasn't given much time to reflect. The door to the inside office opened. Dark-blue pleated skirt, high-necked blouse, dark-brown low shoes, the left heel slightly worn: Mrs. Mikecz stood in the doorway, still turned toward Lautenburg, whose fat, sweaty features were visible over her shoulders. He looked cheerful. Aliz felt her suspicions confirmed: nothing had happened.

'So then...' drawled Mrs. Mikecz, and her voice seemed rather weary, 'then you'll attend to the shipment of green peas.'

'Today for sure,' said Lautenburg with a brief but malicious glance at Aliz. 'I'll get right at it, Sari dear.'

'Thank you,' said Mrs. Mikecz, extending her hand. Lautenburg took the neat, stubby fingers between his two fleshy palms, carefully yet gallantly, to show both courtesy and strength.

'Not at all, Sari dear, not at all,' he said aloud, as if grateful in advance for what he would so gladly be grateful for if

everything went as he thought. 'And if you ever need anything, Sari dear, just depend on me.' He turned back into his office and the door closed behind him.

Aliz rose, hoping to learn something at last. It seemed impossible that Mrs. Mikecz wouldn't at least drop her a hint. That would suffice; the rest she could sniff out, once Mrs. Mikecz calmed down a bit. But Mrs. Mikecz brushed by her, head lowered, care-laden, without a glance in her direction. This new indifference was the final blow. Reeling with hatred, Aliz clutched the typewriter to steady herself. By now she knew the time of vengeance had come.

For a moment Mrs. Mikecz hesitated, with the annoyed look of someone who has been cut off in the middle of a sentence. Then she glanced at Rezi's desk as if expecting to find her sitting there, coolly concentrating on her work. While she had been talking with Lautenburg, a thought kept bobbing up within her: what if, after their discussion, she stepped out and found Rezi there? And each time a rage mixed with panic seized her, a childish dumb rage such as she had last felt as a child when two grinning boys had snatched her brand-new rag doll and run off with it, laughing. But Rezi's chair was empty. Mrs. Mikecz felt a strange relief. She's not here, she thought—not here after all. How could such nonsense have entered her mind? The boys had always returned the doll in the end. She headed toward the door which led from the secretariat through the accounting office to the Party office.

At the door Mrs. Mikecz stopped short, listening. From the accounting office came a low, agitated murmur, a restless underground rumble which now waned, now waxed, stretching her already strained nerves even further. It was easy to imagine what they were whispering about—Rezi, of course. A wild rage spread irresistibly through her head, throbbing behind her eyelids. Into her mind's eye flashed the well-known features of the accounting staff. Dezso Schon with his bald head and the little bubbles of saliva at his mouth, raising his tobacco-stained index finger; pale Lili Feher with clasped hands, cracking her thin bony knuckles; Edit Simonovics with her trembling, fawnlike glance; Geza Libaldy, fresh-shaven face powdered white; fat Mrs. Horvai in a flower print dress, munching the inevitable apple. Hate mingled in Mrs. Mikecz with a certain measure of disdain. These were petty-bourgeois, cheap, miserable bourgeois people ensconced in shells of selfishness, parched with hypocrisy, sickly dwarfs snarling at

the Party, spoiled darlings, the best allies of American imperialism, who would drown her if they could, would turn back the clock if they could to that cursed time when the workers' lot was squalor and exploitation, toil and servility. It was deeply satisfying to know that the clock could never be turned back, that all their plans and plots were in vain! Mrs. Mikecz smiled triumphantly. Their knowledge and their toil must be made to serve Socialism. That was her job. What did they know of the things she knew in her bones; what did they know of the trends and laws of history, the interaction of chance and necessity, the concepts of proletarian dictatorship, the crisis of capitalism, the role of the Soviet Union, the problems of the peasant-worker alliance? Did they know anything at all? They lived deep below ground, cut off from the light of theory and the splendor of practice, scurrying like moles through dark corridors of a sub-life, nursing memories of an extinguished era until . . . yes, until the moment she deigned to swoop down on them, down on this evil which the people had already long since tossed on the dunghills of history; they were under her thumb and would not get away. She flung open the door.

Silence greeted her. The hum had ceased. Everybody appeared zealously immersed in work. She had frequently noticed that people grew mute at her approach, only to perk up again with altered facial expressions and lively talk with which to mask the vileness of their earlier whisperings. This time it was bald Dezso Schon who cast the first sidelong glance in her direction; then, a thin crooked smile spread across his mouth as if to say, Here I am, look at me, at your service. Geza Libaldy obliged with a calculated cough; Edit Simonovics quivered; Mrs. Horvai beamed cheerily, like the huge lush roses on her cheap print dress; Sari dear, if you want to know what was going on before you stepped in, just turn to me with confidence. Lili Feher wrung her knuckles as if wrestling with some payroll problem. Ordinarily Mrs. Mikecz would have acknowledged the smiles with a few pleasant words here and there, a gesture, or simply a warm glance (one must know how to handle people), but this time she did not respond. Without a word she swept across the room and out.

Once at her own desk she locked the door to her office and told the switchboard not to put through any calls (except, of course, from the District Party Committee) because she had work to do. It was stuffy in the little room; she had closed the window earlier when the bright lightning of the nearing storm.

was already flashing over Guszev Street. Then she settled restlessly in the snug easy chair, hands in her lap.

What cowardice, what petty-bourgeois timidity had kept her from bringing up the problem of Rezi and telling that fat, wheezing Lautenburg that she considered him responsible for everything? After all, it was he who had forced through Rezi's promotion, intriguing and pleading until he managed to have the girl transferred from shipping to the director's office despite Vili Racz's definite disapproval. Lautenburg had argued—not without reason—that Aliz could not cope with the mounting flood of work alone while Vili Racz—with similar justification—countered that the fulfillment—or rather over-fulfillment—of the export plan was paramount; consequently there was greater need for a good worker like Rezi in the shipping department than in the director's office. There were others who could be switched, but Lautenburg had clung stubbornly to Rezi, though to tell the truth (and it had been well drilled into Mrs. Mikecz at the Party school that a Communist must ceaselessly and tirelessly seek the objective truth) she, too, rather leaned toward Rezi. She felt a sort of distant, inexplicable attraction which she had sought to conceal from herself at the time. Then she had forgotten about it.

Now, in the solitude of the Party office, that feeling of attraction again dawned within her. A depressing anxiety seized her, for she no longer had the slightest doubt that Rezi was among the enemy (her brother's arrest proved this clearer than day) and she knew that she should be hated, hated mercilessly. But her feelings failed to respond. An agitated tingle spread through her limbs, took charge of her nerves and mastered her will: she couldn't hate Rezi, and her awareness of this was disheartening, humiliating, yet at the same time as pleasant as a lukewarm bath.

At that instant she remembered the dream she had had the night before.

It was dark: black and impenetrable. She was lying somewhere, unable to determine whether in bed or on the floor, but it did not matter, for the feeling was more like a sensual floating, a benumbed sprawling, than ordinary sleep. The darkness wrapped her in soft fur; the darkness was an actual substance and it seemed to sense her body's desires. It hugged the line of her back and like a hammock began to rock her gently. Then far above, at an infinite distance, she saw a glowing point approaching at dizzying speed. The darkness seemed to close

around the solitary meteor, whose radiance bounced ineffectively off the impenetrable night, yet lost nothing of its own inner force as it neared, growing larger and larger. She felt no fear, just an impatient physical desire to come face to face with the unknown light as quickly as possible. Her wish was granted.

A powerful, naked male body stood before her, close enough to touch, like a statue, yet alive and filled with trembling strength. The glow, whose source must have been somewhere deep within, fired the body almost to translucence. The high furrowed brow, the straight narrow nose, the pale lower lip sparkled whitely in the terrific heat which would have melted the hardest metal but did no harm to this body. With gratification she noticed now that the body was smooth: apart from the black hair graying at the temples and the dense jet eyelashes, there was not a single hair on it. The face was hairless, the vaulted arch of the chest, the abdomen, the thighs and legs, the soft mound of the groin whose hot nakedness was made still more provocative and astounding by the fact that it melded smoothly into the hard curve of the thighs, leaving blank the place of maleness. She felt an obscure, moist wish to touch the body, to caress the fine skin with its network of veins showing thin blue. Yet she didn't dare move. She was paralyzed.

Two glowing arms reached toward her slowly, deliberately. On the verge of fainting, aware that the fires streaming from the body would burn her to ashes at the instant of contact, she gathered all her strength to free herself from the spell radiating from behind the closed eyes, but still she couldn't move. She stared helplessly at the approach of the luminous palms whose freakishly crossed lines glittered before her eyes. The arms, bare as snakes, lunged at her body. She wanted to scream, but all that came out of her throat was a desperate animal groan. The glowing body was cold, like ice. Then she began to fall. The darkness rumbled open beneath her. She did not see the depth, only felt it as she whirled dizzily down, catching in a flash one final glimpse of the ice-cold, throbbing male body.

She awoke tired, weighed down by stiffened limbs which stretched flaccidly beneath the soft blanket, and when she tried to get up they drew her back down by their sheer weight. For a while she remained in bed, her eyes closed, helpless. She did not remember her dream then.

For months now she had been getting home late: ten or half past ten. Frequently, around eight o'clock, an irresistible

drowsiness took hold of her and her temples throbbed. Even coffee did not help. She just sat at her desk, desperately trying to keep her eyes open.

The office would be quiet; everyone had gone home. If she could only sleep, she would think, sleep, sleep. But she didn't go home. You could never tell when the secretary of the district Party committee, his assistant, or maybe someone from the *Agitprop* or the organization division might call up once more: How about tomorrow's seminar? Was Thursday's membership meeting all set? We need last month's plan-fulfillment data. No, we still haven't received the report; next time please be more prompt, Comrade, more prompt.... What would happen if they did not find her at her desk?

Her mind wandered back to a conference of Party Secretaries. The chairman, Secretary of the District Party Committee, had raised his voice admonishingly. 'As for rest, Comrades, there'll be time enough for that in the grave. Our era is not one of rest, and especially not for Communists.' A tired smile had flashed across his face. This balding, walrus-mustached man in his fifties who had spent half his life in prisons, on battlefields and in POW camps rarely smiled. A black patch covered his left eye. There was a rumor that he had been wounded at Kiev at the time of the big break-through in January 1942. He neither confirmed nor denied such whisperings. The eye had been lost in Lubyanka Prison during the winter of 1934 because he had insisted that there wasn't a word of truth in the charge that he had contacted a Leningrad agent of the Nazi Party on direct orders from Radek; it couldn't be true if for no other reason than that during the past ten years he hadn't once been to Leningrad. 'Only those who don't work don't get tired,' the Party Secretary went on. 'So don't complain, Comrades....' Mrs. Mikecz, remembering this splendid, tireless man, again felt a rush of shame. She glanced at her watch. It was four minutes past seven. She struggled to her feet.

The fresh cold water quickly revived her. For a long time she rubbed her body with the soap, but it kept slipping out of her hand and sliding inside the narrow, short bathtub. It was difficult to retrieve. There was no light in the cramped, windowless nook. Every little delay like this became a major annoyance in the mornings. In order to reach her desk the proper ten minutes before work started, she had to leave home by a quarter to eight at the latest. But washing, dressing, breakfasting—hurry as she might—took forty minutes and

then there was still the ceremony of combing her hair. And today she was in a special rush. The affair of Rezi Karolinszky awaited final action. Quickly she toweled herself dry, slipped into the frayed white terry-cloth dressing gown and returned to the bedroom.

She opened the door cautiously, so as not to disturb her husband, who worked the night shift at the Iron Works. But he was awake, smoking a cigarette, propped up on his right elbow in bed and staring with sleepily blinking eyes at the thin strip of light which broke suddenly into the room from behind the grayish-blue linen curtains.

'You're not asleep?' asked Mrs. Mikecz. She stepped to the window and swiftly drew the curtains apart. Light flooded the room.

'Yes, I am,' he said hoarsely. 'I'm still asleep. Don't you see? I'm smoking in my dreams.' Mrs. Mikecz shrugged. She'd grown used to such replies; they left her cold. During the past few months all contact with her husband had finally snapped; his very touch was revolting. Yet for a long time it had been her greatest sorrow that she could not have a child. But then this fact had sunk to the everyday level of biological inevitability, and her living with him had gone through a surprisingly quick change. First it became a sort of sad but rather unpleasant habit whose pain decreased in direct ratio to the increase of her Party work; then suddenly it changed to a torture in which nausea was mixed with scorn. Mrs. Mikecz discovered that everything nature had denied her could be provided by the new passion. From then on her husband argued, pleaded or threatened in vain; she refused to see a doctor, as if by giving up the idea of having a child she was proving her loyalty to the Party. She was proud of it. She had passed the test, vanquishing her most personal desire.

She began to comb her hair.

Mikecz watched her awhile, absently.

The cigarette, after a night of chain-smoking, gave no pleasure, but he didn't stub it out. Ashes fell on the light-green silk coverlet. That didn't bother him. He coughed violently, barking, because a quick inhalation swept the smoke down his throat and into his stomach. Yesterday afternoon, when the pressure on his chest had grown almost intolerable and his skull threatened to split, he had finally resolved to see a doctor.

In the anteroom of the Iron Works clinic, the afternoon sun

shone on the pale-blue linoleum floor. The snow-white walls glistened. Mikecz waited patiently, standing by the open window where you could see the chimneys smoking furiously. He felt terrible. That was when he noticed that he was alone in the anteroom.

A young girl emerged from the office. Mikecz had known her all her life; it hadn't been so long ago that she had played on his knee. She was Ilona, daughter of old Mozes Izsaki, three-time *Stakhanovite* at the lathe shop. Before completing the ninety-day nursing course, she had worked on the assembly line at the screw factory. She looked at him, surprised.

'You still here, Uncle Joska?' she asked.

'Looks that way,' he replied. 'Where else would I be waiting for a checkup?' The girl locked the surgery door and slipped the key into the pocket of her white uniform.

'The doctor isn't seeing patients today,' she said officiously. Her formality made him smile. Had the butterfly emerged from its chrysalis? The Iron Works siren sounded. It was three o'clock, the beginning of the next shift. The girl glanced pointedly at her wrist watch.

'But why not?' he asked, looking at her.

She returned his glance brightly. 'Because Comrade Salgo isn't in today.'

'Will he be here tomorrow?' Mikecz asked.

He despised doctors (an inheritance from his peasant mother), but Dr. Lazlo Salgo, the Iron Works doctor, was an exception. He respected Salgo's knowledge, zeal, even if he didn't like him personally. As if sensing this, the doctor often dropped by at Mikecz's post to ask advice. Though he didn't belong to the plant's Party cell, the smelters often asked him to lecture. The doctor welcomed such invitations. He not only liked to speak but spoke well. Magically enlivening the driest of themes, he held forth spiritedly, arguing and expounding with great broad gestures. Not long ago, for a few seconds, he had actually persuaded his listeners that the norm adjustments which cut their wages by some 20 per cent *really* benefited them. The smelters at first fell silent, then began to grumble, then laughed; Dr. Laszlo Salgo had scored a definite success. He, at least, believed what he was saying.

The girl hung her head. 'I don't know.'

'Why don't you know?'

'Because he didn't come in yesterday either,' she admitted in a small voice.

'Did he phone?'

'No, I phoned his home, Uncle Joska.'

'Is he sick?'

'He wasn't there,' Ilona said.

'Who told you so?' From the plant below came the roar of a truck.

'His wife,' Ilona replied. 'She said he was out of town. Left the night before last. Suddenly.'

'Where to?' Mikecz asked. The hum in his head increased. 'Did she say where he went?'

'She said she didn't know herself,' the girl answered. 'Why are you pumping me, Uncle Joska?'

'When will he be back?'

Now Ilona had reached the outside door to the waiting room. Evidently she was anxious to leave. 'He left no message,' she replied irritably. 'Why don't you give his wife a ring, Uncle Joska? There's a telephone in the library downstairs. I've got to go now.'

'Out of town,' he mused, ambling toward the main gate; where the hell could he have gone so suddenly? Mikecz strolled down to the Danube shore. For a while he wandered aimlessly among the smoking, dusty slag heaps. The hum in his head subsided a bit, as if the wide cloudless sky, the green hills on the far shore understood and absorbed his sorrow. Gathering a few flat stones, he skimmed them across the water, watching them swish and splash in ever shortening skips till at last they sank. He lingered by the shore in the breeze that arose as dusk fell. His throat was dry; he longed for a tall, cool glass of white wine and soda. Dr. Salgo's sudden trip was forgotten.

This morning his chest felt even worse, but he lit another cigarette. His eyes wandered away from his wife and around the room. He had lived in this one room for thirty years; he was ten years old when his parents came to Budapest and moved in here. All that his gaze took in, and more, was familiar to distraction: the curtains, the once elegant floor lamp with its yellow shade, the sofa from which a spring had stuck out for twenty-two years, the thin strip above the house-tops called sky—everything.

All he saw was so hopelessly and inescapably a part of his life—not just the present but the future too. But by now it had come to comprise a separate world. Jozsef Mikecz, who for long years had rabidly hated his condition, had come to realize that from the jail of loathesome routine there was no escape—and he was startled to find within himself a strange relief in returning from the outer world to this home of his childhood

and youth. Once he had fled the house to break the mildly death-like hold of the worn curtains and the broken-sprung sofa; now he came home to escape the glittering, unbearable embrace of the steel mill. Nausea still caught at his throat each time he turned from Maria Terezia Square into the narrow, short, depressing little street and glimpsed the grocery-store sign near his entrance, yet he felt that this world with all its drabness and stifling monotony was closer to him because it did not try, like the other, to hide its inherent senselessness behind blaring slogans and shiny lies. Here everything was just as it looked: poor, gray, restricted, dull, but at least it didn't try to convince anyone that it was rich and bright and wise; if it cheated, it was not to deny but to render more bearable its misery—unlike the outside world, which did not cheat to render more bearable but to falsify the bleakness, calling lies truth and truth lies.

Mrs. Mikecz was still combing her hair.

With measured strokes the hard bone teeth brought glistening order to the snarled strands of her long brown hair. She loved to comb it. The pensive rhythmic movements involuntarily recalled the time when hair combing was still important in life, a productive pastime, an important means of conquering the world, and although she had buried that era deep in her subconscious, she could not free herself of this now meaningless habit. Again and again she had resolved to cut the quarter-hour ritual to three minutes, but the moment she stood before the mirror and undid the stubbornly matted strands, she could not resist. Indeed, on those rare occasions when she found herself alone in her office, she'd quickly snatch the comb from her little purse, prop her small mirror against the inkwell and begin combing her hair secretly. Her belief that she could control her emotions would melt then like a child, and she would observe with dismay her own confusion and weakness. She blushed now as though she had been sharply scolded. Quickly she switched on the radio.

Light music sounded; a fast Russian waltz whose swift scales swept the room, dallying awhile with a syrupy C sharp, it boldly jumped two octaves, as if to reassure the world that despite reports to the contrary, there is no incurable sorrow. She smiled. The familiar tune suddenly dissolved her confusion and restored her to that world in which she felt strong and resolute. With a half-abashed, half-angry gesture, she tossed the comb upon her little table.

'Turn it off,' her husband spoke up unexpectedly. He began to cough again. As he lay on his back with his eyes closed, his face was strangely thin, his chin stubbled, his eyelids red.

'Why?' she snapped. 'May I ask why?'

Her husband opened his eyes. 'Just turn it off,' he said then softly. 'It disturbs me.'

Mrs. Mikecz took a step toward the bed. 'Because it's Russian?' she asked provocatively.

Over his face a thin smile flitted. 'Because it's loud,' he replied.

'Is this your ideology, to lie in bed all day staring at the ceiling? Aren't you ashamed of yourself?'

The man said nothing for a while. 'Turn it off,' he then repeated firmly. 'That won't conflict with the Party line.'

Mrs. Mikecz stood at the foot of the bed. She hated her husband just then, with stark disgust, but deep in her hate there still lurked something of that humble compliance which once bound her to him. With a quick involuntary movement she switched off the radio, then shrugged and began dressing hurriedly. What she owed this man, who had rescued her from the hopeless drift of her youth with the simplicity of his love, never entered her thoughts any more. Mrs. Mikecz, not knowing how unresolved pain can turn to anger, and how quickly anger—if not smoothed by love—can turn to hate, did not even suspect that at the core of her husband's silence the pain of disillusionment had grown to anger and by now all that forestalled an explosion was love's residue. Thus she regarded his stubborn silence as sly cowardice, unmanly surrender. But what could she do about it? She had tried so often, but in vain. Should she make still another effort? It seemed hopeless; yet she turned back at the door.

'You know,' she said all at once, more in curiosity than hate. 'I often wonder how you ... actually could have become a *Stakhanovite*.'

He half rose, gazing with interest as at a strange stuffed bird that had spoken up unexpectedly. At the edge of his mouth a faint, weary smile hovered.

'I'll tell you,' he said then, still blinking in the light, 'if that's really all you want to know. By the progressive and economical organization of production. That is, by cheating. Like everyone else. Didn't you know that?' Then he slumped back in the bed. The hall door slammed behind her.

Mrs. Mikecz got on the bus, relieved. At last the cup had run

over, and that was that. Responsibility for all that happened and would happen to him was no longer her concern. She was bowed by the weight of other cares.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

To be circumspect, thought Dr. Vilmos Racz, Trade Union Committee Chairman of the Hungarian People's Fruit and Vegetable Canning Authority, as he carefully wiped his gold-rimmed glasses with a tiny chamois cloth, does not mean that I do not make mistakes. Everyone does. I am circumspect when I detect the mistakes of others and draw conclusions from them. He who fails to exploit the errors of others deserves his fate. It's a sin, if such a thing exists. So when I slip up without being caught, that's no sign of my adroitness but of others' stupidity. Ruthlessness is the mainstay of life. He who would conquer must not forgive. This system stays on top because it never forgives anyone. And that is as it should be. There is just one requirement: wait for and recognize the right moment, the moment when everyone expects us to forgive. That is when you must strike, quick and true. The inevitable result will follow.

He leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs and took a good look at Mrs. Mikecz. He sensed that the chance had come for which he had secretly and zealously prepared over the past months.

Mrs. Mikecz was talking about her latest plan with unusual tenseness, puttering, passing her hand continually over her brow as if to banish a nightmare. It was necessary, she said, to call an emergency meeting right after work, at five o'clock, when they and the staff would discuss the case of Rezi Karolinsky, pass a resolution denouncing the girl and demand her immediate dismissal. Vili Racz nodded. His face showed no trace of scorn or gratification, though Mrs. Mikecz's plan unexpectedly played straight into his hands. He had long ago learned how to hide his feelings beneath his smooth-shaven skin. Now the mask of utter solidarity slid over his face.

He knew that Mrs. Mikecz disliked him but also respected him. He also knew the reasons for that attitude. The other workers in the organization made no secret of their liking for

him; the women adored him, the men thought him their friend and, when in difficulties, turned to him rather than to Lautenburg or Mrs. Mikecz. His voice carried special weight, despite his background (his father had owned a wholesale stationery firm). He had the ear of the Ministry, the District Party Committee, even the Party center. Once or twice Mrs. Mikecz had ventured some criticism of him before the District Party Committee and had been slapped down each time. She soon drew back, realizing that his influence was on the rise, but he knew she resented bowing to his prestige.

The cost of achieving and retaining that prestige was prodigious: it took nerve-racking, keen calculation and superhuman control. He had had to overcome the Party's intuitive, organized resistance. He had had to gain the workers' confidence. He had had to cleverly intimidate those who might possibly cross his plans, without their being able to protest. He had had to collect data (on his associates; on the often changing members of the District Party Committee; on the Ministry staff) which would ease his entry to the most delicate areas. More subtly, he had parried all feelers from the District Party Committee or the Ministry hinting at promotion to a higher post. That resistance brought two inestimable advantages. For one thing, it established his modesty, good sense and honesty; for another, it strengthened him as chairman of the Trade Union Committee and enabled him to continue his intelligence work.

At the same time, he had to soften the powers that be in the Ministry and the District Party Committee. It was this task which required the greatest skill and concentration. From the most astute psychological analyses of the principal functionaries, he would draw careful generalizations and act accordingly. Not even a shadow of suspicion could be permitted to fall on him. It would have been clumsy, for instance, to rush to the District Party Secretary with the simple truth that Mrs. Mikecz was a destructive nuisance. Even if One Eye didn't like her—he liked no one—he at least favored the woman, referring proudly to her proletarian origin and how well she held her course through the churning, petty-bourgeois sea of the Canning Authority. Therefore, distrust and suspicion had to be dripped into his heart and mind with slow, cautious little doses. After a while One Eye thought he had noticed certain deviations in the work of Mrs. Mikecz. He informed Dr. Vilmos Racz, who of course had to confirm the Party Secretary's doubts on the basis of his own observations these past

weeks. Yet he could not but voice his opinion that in Mrs. Mikecz's case the source of the trouble lay solely in her lack of experience; she meant well, and, if he might presume to advise in the matter, drastic measures (such as dismissal) should be held in abeyance. At this point an admonishment or warning would suffice. The District Party Secretary thought it over and finally concurred. Thus Vilmos Racz's humaneness served to raise his status in the eyes of that still somewhat mistrustful official.

The Lautenburg situation was different. The fat director was suspect, suspect from the beginning. In the face of constantly thickening suspicion, Vilmos Racz had to show a certain modest, well-intentioned hesitation. He gravely and deliberately praised Lautenburg to the Ministry's section chief (a former shoe-factory hand) and in the presence of Vilma Holcz. Racz knew that neither the section chief nor Vilma Holcz were much taken by him, probably because his background was middle-class—like Lautenburg's. So he went to the Ministry and, in the presence of the section chief and Vilma Holcz, exercised deep, sincere Communist self-criticism. He confessed that he had erred in evaluating Lautenburg and ascribed his error to a lack of vigilance, meanwhile hinting faintly but unmistakably at the remnants of his tainted origin that still awaited eradication. Then he promised to be more vigilant in the future. The section chief smiled with satisfaction. Vilma Holcz nodded brightly. After that, no one could harbor any suspicions that Vilmos Racz was intriguing against Lautenburg. The brief reports and memoranda which Racz submitted to them—at first every week or two, then a little more frequently—were simply the fruit of self-criticism. He had kept his pledge: he was more vigilant. The section chief did not hide his gratification, and Racz knew that they now considered him a zealous young comrade.

Other situations called for different tactics. Gradually it had dawned on him that life's meaning lay in complete purposefulness and that ruthlessness differs from mercy only insofar as it demands more self-control and a more vivid imagination; otherwise, both serve the same purpose: to humiliate those who deserve nothing but humiliation. Despite all this, Vilmos Racz did not look down on people; in fact, in his own way he respected them. Since he always took his own aims seriously, he did not discount those of others, regarding them merely as obstacles to be overcome. He avoided any emotional involvement in the affairs of his comrades and associates but did not

hesitate to involve them emotionally in his own affairs if he counted on them or wished to count on them for the realization of his plans. This duality never bothered him. Women who fell in love with him were sloughed off so neatly that they even grew more fond of him afterward; men who sought his friendship were handled with such finesse that they were deeply convinced of the substance of that friendship and its permanence. Since he had reached the conclusion early in life that men should be judged not on merit but usefulness (meaning usefulness to him) he also soon saw how easy it was to succeed in a power system which rates its members solely from the standpoint of their social usefulness (meaning their usefulness to the ruling strata). All it demanded of him was observance of the most basic necessity: hypocrisy. This discovery enabled him to disarm his associates, to transform their instinctive reserve or snappish distrust into a sort of awed trust: by espousing their interest he best served his own. In this fashion he avoided both the invisibly yawning booby traps and the too facile springboards. They were equally dangerous from the bird's eye-view of thorough purposefulness. He was not impatient. He could wait.

But three days ago, when news of the arrest of Antal Karolinszky-Thorok spread through the firm, it grew plain that he had arrived at a turning point. He possessed all the necessary facts. He could prove that Rezi Karolinszky had been brought to the secretariat at Lautenburg's express request, with Mrs. Mikecz's approval and over his own firm protest. In his hands he held Rezi's written avowal that Mrs. Mikecz had proposed Party membership to her, indeed was willing to act as one of her sponsors. Any keen observer could clearly see that there was some kind of relationship between Lautenburg and Rezi Karolinszky (still to be uncovered) and that Mrs. Mikecz's lack of vigilance had endangered the Party's purity. It was only through his, Vilmos Racz's, intervention that the enemy, or at least an individual suspected of hostile activities, had not succeeded in infecting it. Then, like a godsend, came Rezi's surprise disappearance (which confirmed her guilt or complicity) while Mrs. Mikecz's plan for denouncing her simply crowned his plans in that area without his having to lift a finger.

Mrs. Mikecz left, saying she would go straight to the District Party Committee to discuss and prepare for the afternoon meeting. When her steps had died away on the squeaky floorboards of the narrow corridor, he at once picked up the phone

and dialed the District Party Committee. His luck held; the Secretary was at his desk. Racz reported that Mrs. Mikecz was on her way to present a plan for a quick meeting on the Rezi Karolinszky case, which was certainly desirable, except that she intended to impose the meeting *from above* instead of first sounding out the rank and file, hearing their views and—that too was conceivable—their objections. Such dictatorial methods were against the spirit of Marxism–Leninism and Party practice. This certainly showed that Mrs. Mikecz was incapable of correcting her earlier fault: she underestimated the masses, was actually drifting away from them and overrating her own person. While this fault, in his view, was not fatal, it was still extremely dangerous. Similar criticism of Mrs. Mikecz had cropped up more and more frequently of late; action must be taken to improve Mrs. Mikecz's work and avoid such mistakes in the future. Of course the extent of such action was not his to decide; it lay within the discretion of the Party Committee Secretary. But he thought the meeting should be held in any case, with suitable preparation of course, if only because the workers obviously felt obliged to take a firm stand on the Rezi Karolinszky question—the question of subversion by the enemy. . . . The District Secretary thanked him for the briefing and branded Mrs. Mikecz's procedure as shocking. At this point, even before seeing Mrs. Mikecz, he wanted Racz to take over the preparation and organization of the meeting.

Vilmos Racz then dialed Vilma Holcz. The Ministry's cadre leader sulked a bit because she hadn't learned about Rezi earlier, but since the hiring and firing of the secretariat staff lay outside her jurisdiction she could not complain and in a sense had to be grateful to Racz for the information, *spahseeba*. She would consult the National Cadre Division and also speak to Mrs. Mikecz at the first opportunity.

Next Racz telephoned Janos Zeller, the section chief. He was in a staff conference, but by telling the secretary it was most urgent Racz managed to have him called out. Zeller was in a bad mood. Only a quarter of an hour earlier the Ministry's Party Committee Secretary had attacked him sharply because of moral laxity in his section, hinting unmistakably that the trouble started at the top. The section chief's irritation was all the more understandable since his secretary had just begun to show signs of being co-operative: during yesterday's dictation he had kissed her on the ear, and she didn't pull her head back as so often before. Vilmos Racz told him that he had come into possession of valuable data regarding Lautenburg and that

he must see Zeller as soon as possible. The idea galvanized the section chief. An energetic campaign against Lautenburg could blunt the attack on him. He asked Vilmos Ract to come at half past three and returned to the conference room.

Racz made two more calls—one to the Party center's organizing section, the other to the Trade Union Council. At both places he sought with a quick word or two to ascertain the prevailing mood as background to his maneuver. But there was no cause for anxiety: the atmosphere at both the organizing section and the Trade Union Council seemed quite suitable.

Finally he rose from the armchair and stepped to the open window, turning his face to the warm sunlight. First Aliz, then Alajos Sandor came to mind. He had given Aliz a real jolt by his unusual aloofness, but no matter. Aliz must gradually realize that the world was changing and that what she had to report on Mrs. Mikecz was no longer of interest. With Alajos he'd have to use more caution. He had promised Sandor that he'd do all he could to forestall Mrs. Mikecz's precipitateness in the Rezi affair. But keeping that promise no longer seemed so simple; the meeting was imperative. Since he was always meticulous about keeping promises, he would now have to find some way to take care of this one. He again sat down at his desk. If his calculations worked out—and there seemed to be no hitch—Lautenburg would be dismissed within two or three weeks. The identity of his successor was not in question. The section chief had dropped hints more than once in the course of their talks. In the light of what had happened, Mrs. Mikecz's removal was imminent. The future Party Secretary would be fat Mrs. Horvai, a useful little woman. One Eye would probably object to Mrs. Horvai's non-proletarian origin, but Racz didn't consider this obstacle insurmountable; Mrs. Horvai's husband was secretary of the Justice Ministry's Party Committee, a onetime leather worker currently taking night courses at the law school. Once appointed, the woman would follow his orders blindly, so that between Party leadership and management there would be complete harmony. After six months One Eye would exercise self-criticism for being slow to recognize Mrs. Horvai's talents. Would he, Racz, accept the self-criticism? That would hinge on how matters stood six months from now.

He allowed himself half a year in the director's chair. That would be just time enough to set up Janos Zeller's removal and his own appointment as section chief. The blonde he had installed as Zeller's secretary had already reported some weeks

ago that Janos Zeller had risen to the bait. Her task was to keep resisting until she got his nod to yield. Zeller must fall desperately in love with the girl, promise marriage; after twenty years he must leave his wife, his three children. The old cobbler's wife faints before the Ministry, they investigate Janos Zeller, the blonde is pregnant, the law forbids abortions, an emergency staff meeting is called, Vilma Holcz's migraine acts up again, Zeller gets a job at a small crafts co-operative.

For his career at the Ministry he allowed one and a half to two years. From there two roads opened: one to the post of Deputy Minister, the other to the Party center's organizing section. Which of the two he chose would depend on the circumstances. The Deputy Ministership had more glitter and renown; the organizing section offered higher possibilities, more power, broader scope. Again he picked up the phone. He asked Alajos Sandor to step in for a brief talk if he had time; he would appreciate it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Leaving the office of the major general, the colonel stopped at the lounge for a cup of coffee before returning to his own quarters. He was tired and irritable; the two-hour session with General Tarakanov from Moscow and the major general had been exhausting. He wanted to be alone, sink into a soft deep armchair, shut his eyes and think of nothing—if such a thing were possible in this fortress of the damned. It was a few minutes past eleven; the lounge was usually empty at this hour—they were all still in their rooms, manufacturing reports, or in the cellars grilling prisoners, or just picking their nails—so the colonel had a right to expect privacy. But he was out of luck: there were a lot of strangers sprawled in the easy chairs, sipping coffee, smoking cigarettes and making remarks about the young girls in their tight uniforms. The men must have come in from the provinces, because they were obviously enjoying the luxurious setting: the heavy brocade curtains, the deep carpets, the plants basking in the sun.

At first the colonel wanted to turn back, but then he changed his mind. He stepped up to the counter and ordered coffee. For a while he stirred the strong beverage (brewed from a rare

Brazilian blend especially imported for the top echelon) and listened to the carefree hum which filled the room, looked at the self-satisfied though somewhat tired faces, the pudgy hands long since disused to workbench or plow, the whole gay, buzzing familial get-together. He downed the rest of his coffee quickly and made for the door. But he had hardly reached it when he suddenly felt dizzy and found it difficult to breathe. He leaned against the wall and dug out a small vial from the upper left pocket of his tunic. The glittering white nitroglycerin crystals instantaneously relieved the spasm; the terror of death passed. The colonel sighed softly and wiped the cold sweat from his brow. Behind him the hubbub died away. In the hall a young captain and a middle-aged major were coming toward him. He knew them: a year and a half ago they had worked for him on the Social Democrat 'job'—and with what enthusiasm! The colonel remembered how it took him a week to calm down these overenthusiastic servants of the working class. The middle-aged major's forte had been rubber truncheons and electroshock; red-faced, panting, he beat his victims tirelessly, swearing until they fell in a faint. The colonel, who never took part in these exercises himself, sometimes wondered whether it was artificially fanned class hatred or genuine lust that drove this otherwise simple and innocent-looking man. Whenever the colonel looked at the major's sated face, beaming with both offensive humility and superiority, he was seized by a mad desire to leap at his throat, gouge out his eyes, break his bones; and he felt that eventually he would be unable to check the impulse. As soon as the case was ended, the colonel had the major transferred to another group.

Now the colonel returned the stiff salutes of the major and the young captain. He enjoyed vast prestige at the A.V.H.; his toughness, vigilance and Party loyalty were legendary. Some people even said that during the Thirties in Moscow he had played a key role in purging the Hungarian Party of its Trotskyist and Bucharinist traitors, in preparation for the great trials. They claimed that he had been instructed by Comrade Stalin in person to direct the purge. Of course the colonel had heard these stories, but he neither confirmed nor denied them; instead, he let the whispered rumors magnify and expand because he was aware that those who knew what had really occurred would never open their mouths, if only because then he too would have some tales to tell about a very different chapter of history.

The colonel's secretary, a plump and perspiring young sub-

lieutenant, jumped up when he entered the office. The colonel acknowledged her tremulous greeting with a light nod. He was extremely vain, this tall, slim, tanned man with the narrowing gray eyes, the neat brown hair touched with silver at the temples. Her moist gaze irritated him, but he was pleased, too, for he always demanded that women melt in his presence. He handled them masterfully, with cynicism and scorn, and he had a sure way of picking out those women most susceptible to this treatment. The plump sublieutenant, however, was not among the chosen, although at times the colonel would stroke her hair, praise her skin, her figure, the moons of her fingernails (a surefire gambit of his with all women; who else would think of *that*?) and then enjoy watching the young girl's blushing confusion. But now he wasn't in the mood for such things. He sniffed the air and detected tobacco smoke. The doctors had forbidden him to smoke six months ago, so he had forbidden his staff (whether he was there or not) to smoke in his room.

The sublieutenant turned pale. 'Comrade Captain Kapolnai . . .' she began, but was cut off.

'Air out this room!' the colonel shouted furiously. Then he snapped, 'Did Kapolnai bring something?'

The sublieutenant picked up a bulging green folder from the table.

'Hand me that dossier and get out,' the colonel said. 'What business have you in my room? I've told you no one sets foot in here in my absence. Not even you.' He sat down at his desk. The sublieutenant switched on the fan by the door and the bright aluminum blades began to whirl on the wall behind the colonel. Then she shut the door behind her softly, carefully.

It was not the tobacco smoke which had upset the colonel—some two months had already passed since the clash between self-discipline and maddening desire had resolved in the acrid triumph of resignation—but the overstuffed green folder lying in front of him, filled to the bursting point with the carefully typed and annotated documents of the latest action. 'Hemophilia,' the major general had said, laughing and tugging at the strands of his brown mustache. 'How do you like that?' The colonel had not replied. General Tarakanov was snoozing in a distant armchair. 'I forget now who proposed it,' the major general continued, 'but I like it.' The colonel knew that no one had proposed the code name; it had been the major general's own brain-child, and he wanted to try it out on the colonel. 'Excellent,' said the colonel, 'but I'm afraid our comrades

won't get it.' 'You underestimate their familiarity with medical terms,' the major general said sourly. If I underestimated them, thought the colonel, I wouldn't be here. Anyway, who cares; let it be Hemophilia. Only a super idiot like that could invent such nonsense. He shrugged. The major general appeared to be irritated and moved his lips as if he were biting off a thread; he had been a tailor before he became commandant of the Secret Police. 'Profuse bleeding, that's what it means—profuse bleeding!' So now he's showing that he knows what it means, thought the colonel. My God . . .

And there it was, in the lower right-hand corner of the sealed, bound dossier: *Hemophilia*, scribbled by the major general. The colonel threw the folder into the middle drawer of his desk. It did not stir his curiosity. He knew it all by heart. Reaching for the phone, he gave orders for Karolinszky to be brought up from his cell. And just then, like a sneak attack, came the wild, impotent craving for a cigarette.

Since his arrest, Karolinsky had lain almost continuously on the narrow, low cot in the windowless cell, under the incessant glare of the light above the iron door. He did not move. Moisture ran down the walls in little glittering streams, permeating his clothes, his bones. The thick, coarse blanket which had been thrown at him for bedding soaked up the dampness like a sponge and then, as if wrung out by an invisible hand, dripped its dirty-gray, chill excretion upon Karolinszky's body. But he did not care, just as he was not disturbed by the sharp, relentless light or the opening of the peephole in the iron door at regular intervals. At first he had an impulse to pull down his pants and surprise the intruder with his bare ass; then, on second thought, he just lay there without moving.

The sense of relief which had seized him the minute the car stopped in front of the villa had been slowly replaced by a strange, sensual awareness, as if his body's interest in what lay ahead had superseded that of his mind. This feeling had spread quickly, growing ever more sharp and definite, until it had shut the past out of his consciousness, limiting life solely to the present. The light, bubbling excitement in his veins made him feel so well that he almost cried out in joy: now, at last, he was truly alone!

He stretched out on the cot luxuriously. There was no longer any sense in remembering; memory had no content now. All that had ever happened in the past—did it really

happen?—became uninteresting and stupid. He felt suspended between heaven and earth. But this floating resembled neither life nor death; it had no past or future, and the present became a void whose very incomprehensibility pleased him. Funny, he thought; I never expected to find such comfort in death. It's a pity I'm still alive *Dolce far niente*. But if eternity is like this, then I don't mind. He was rocking in the hammock of timelessness.

The clatter of keys startled him. At the half-open iron door stood a young uniformed punk, his nose crinkled in disgust at the stench in the cell. From half-closed eyes, Karolinszky gazed with interest at the young man, who held a battered, dirty aluminum mess tin in his hand. For a moment he seemed puzzled as to where to put it; then he dropped it on the floor and left. The professor heard the key grate in the lock. The sound of steps grew fainter. At first he thought he'd get up and dump the purplish swill into the pail, just as it was—a suspicious mess even at three paces. But to do this he would have had to get up and leave his cot, so he decided not to move. He was not hungry, but he couldn't take his eye off the mess tin. It attracted him irresistibly, captivated his fancy and presently became the focus of his thought. Without really wanting to, he carefully disengaged himself from the damp blanket, rose and, with uncertain steps, approached the mess tin. From up close, the purplish slop seemed even more disgusting and the battered tin dirtier still. He squatted down and, since there was no spoon or any other utensil at hand, he stirred the swill with his fingers. A few beans rose to the surface, one or two gristly scraps of meat and some bits of what appeared to be rotten carrots or kohlrabi. He stood up with the mess tin in his hand. Under the glare of the bulb, the liquid lost its purplish shade and became brick red. Suddenly he realized that the emotion which had driven him from his cot was nothing but burning curiosity.

Leaning against the wet wall of the cell, Karolinszky laughed softly. I'm curious, he thought, surprised, but what am I curious about? he barely phrased the question when he was already aware that the answer did not interest him at all. This curiosity did not resemble that feeling which, only some hours ago, had driven him to C-17's room. This was an indefinite, buzzing giddiness which had taken over the vacuum of his consciousness and resembled absolutely nothing but itself. Let's see, thought the professor. He dipped his finger into the tin again, then precipitately put it in his mouth and

began to suck with gusto. The slop was already cold, the surface scummy, but this did not deter him. Raising the mess tin to his mouth, he tilted his head back, swallowed, and did not stop until he had forced down the last drops of the foul stuff. Then he wiped his mouth with his damp coat sleeve and lay down on the cot. The nausea retreated instantly and Karolinszky acknowledged this with a healthy belch. He took awhile to settle down comfortably, adjusting the soaked blanket around him. He no longer sensed the flow of time: it was passing beyond, not through, him. Time had stopped the moment he threw the empty mess tin into a corner of the cell, and there was no more need to keep track of hours or days. He fell asleep peacefully, like a small child.

Corridors were swimming toward him, bolted cell doors, uniforms, spiral staircases, all in towering noiseless waves. Time seemed to come to life again: sharp sunlight beat his face like a fist, a deep carpet slithered under his feet, curves and straight lines linked in the darkness behind his eyelids. shadows alternated with shadows, a motor roared, winds blew, something rustled, then all was silent again. He slept on. Colors flamed: fleshy green leaves, red petals, yellow walls, brown wardrobe doors. A carved wooden box was shoved under his nose; there was a familiar smell of tobacco. Sounds mixed with colors and scents attacked his brain with an ever-increasing force. The brain rejected the pressure of reality, but surrender was near. From behind him rose a draft which tore the shroud of darkness from the room. Like the feelers of a snail, his mind groped toward light.

What is the difference between Karolinszky and me, thought the colonel, looking curiously but without the slightest compassion at the doctor's pale, unshaven face. There isn't any, that's the funny thing; none at all. The good Lord himself could not say which of us is alive and which is dead. Anyway, such terms are meaningless. We are all dead. To what degree is immaterial. And the pomp or plainness of the funeral is no criterion. If, for example, I were to be whisked off by a thrombosis, they would give me a state funeral because I'm a great warrior of the workers' movement. But if I live on and happen to share Karolinszky's fate, they'll dump my bones in a ditch. Well, I can take it; so will Karolinszky. So far everyone has. The colonel smiled cheerfully. On basic issues, the dead agree like accomplices. He had no doubt that Karolinszky

would concur.

'If I didn't think it might offend you,' he said without the least tinge of sarcasm or superiority, 'I'd ask you to sit down, have a cigarette. A cigarette feels good in our comfortable armchairs. Camel, Lucky Strike, Chesterfield? Very rare these days in our country. I suppose you know that our institution enjoys certain privileges. I can fill you in on details, of course, but I'm afraid there'd be little that is new to you. To tell the truth, that's not really why I asked you here. We could have a chat, don't you think?'

He realized that his sudden good mood, which momentarily quenched even his craving for a cigarette, was making him unusually loquacious. His midmorning grouch had vanished, yielding to an excitement he had not felt in a long time. Just to talk! For years the colonel had not talked with anyone. He conferred, consulted, instructed, gave orders, interrogated or just listened if he felt like it. Mostly he didn't even listen; what could anyone tell him that was new? He smoothed his hair and gazed out the open balcony door as if completely oblivious to Karolinszky's presence.

What had happened to the walks lasting till dawn, the angry frowns, small rages, great passions? When every word had momentous significance, when every act had its meaning, a more lofty, perfect, complete meaning—pristine and prehistorical. Where had that ancient era gone, that age of battle for man's salvation? The colonel felt as though he were recalling some primal being, an Early Man who was himself but by some strange chance had outlived his allotted time. On the dark cave wall of his consciousness appeared mysterious diagrams; long ago he had been able to read them but now, try as he would, he could not. That was when I died, the colonel thought; that was when I forgot the key. His gaze fell on Karolinszky, still standing mute, immobile, in the middle of the room. You too have forgotten, don't deny it. Maybe together we could conjure it up somehow.

Whenever he had seen the professor in the hospital halls, white-coated, head low, hands in his pockets, gliding past patients and onlookers, he had felt yearningly that here was the only human being in this wretched world with whom he could talk. The only one, the colonel mused, to whom he could say that he'd lost the key and by now no longer cared. Who else was there? His underlings, those brutes living in a drugged daze of hatred, flattened into anonymity by the terror they created? His superiors, concerned only with their own ease

and safety, who were as impervious to the cares, griefs and joys of others as he? His wife, with whom he'd scarcely exchanged a word in years? His mistress, who dutifully reported everything he said because they would hang her if she didn't? The invisible rope, which he'd not only helped to braid but which he himself held at one end, grew taut at his throat. The colonel tried hard to remember that Early Man; why had he been happy? But by now the colonel had forgotten even that.

Karolinszky's face was covered with the black stubble of a four-day-old beard. Between the straight nose and the mobile, pale mouth lay the lines of an ancient disgust. 'What must I sign?' he asked abruptly.

The colonel laughed to himself. We understand each other, that's why I want to talk with him, that's why. 'I'm sorry to have to correct your conception of us a bit,' he said. All at once he was calm. That Early Man was dead, of no concern to the colonel. 'For the time being, there is nothing to sign. Won't you have a cigarette?' Again he shoved the wooden box under the professor's nose.

Karolinszky was standing quite close to him now; the dank stench of his mildewed clothes struck him. He waited impatiently for the professor to take a cigarette. But Karolinszky did not touch them. 'I don't smoke,' he said expressionlessly.

The colonel laughed again. Right, he thought: the dead have no business smoking. 'Is it a matter of principle for you not to take a cigarette?' he asked and sat down in an armchair.

'Are you interested in my principles or my case history?' the professor said, still in the same tone.

'Both. Naturally, both.'

'I have never smoked,' said the professor. He wasn't lying; while asleep he had forgotten that he ever held a cigarette in his mouth.

'Never?' asked the colonel. 'Are you rewriting history?'

'Why not?' asked the professor. 'Is that prerogative reserved for you people?'

'Let me warn you,' said the colonel, playfully raising his right index finger, 'this room is wired. Your answers will be taped, evaluated and typed up for later reference.' Childish joy gleamed in his eyes. He had been preparing for weeks to rub it into the major general's nose that he knew about the microphones they had put in his room when he had been away on vacation. The spy system was most efficient.

'Let them record what they like,' said the professor. 'Besides, they're watching you, not me.'

Involuntarily, the colonel patted his hip pocket, felt the loaded automatic pistol. At night he kept it under his pillow; he didn't want to be caught unaware. Would they come at dawn? Would the major general himself be standing in the doorway? He liked a good show. Strange, thought the colonel, how much the dead fear death. His desire for a cigarette suddenly fused with a distant, racking fear of death. If there were even a spark of decency left in me, I'd give him the pistol, smoke a cigarette and pull the trigger on myself too. What is decency? Self-preservation. Everything that is beyond self-preservation is also beyond decency. Our age has just one commandment: Love yourself more than you love your neighbor because your neighbor loves himself more than he loves you. 'Please be seated,' he said then stiffly and took his place behind the desk. 'And answer my questions without any comment, please. I assume you know why you are here?'

The professor, before seating himself across from the desk, glanced out the open balcony door at the Danube, at the full-foliaged chestnut trees lining the far bank, at the yellow trolleys rumbling across the bridge, at the seagulls gracefully sailing over the water. His look was stern, unsoftened by the familiar beauty; he simply sought to bring within the framework of perception all that his emotions up till now had disregarded. 'Toni, dear,' Flora had asked, lacing her arm into his, quietly trembling, 'I assume you know why you are here.' The Doges' Palace was mellow in the rays of the setting sun. Blue turned to pink. The professor was disgusted by the sirupy richness of it all. 'No,' he had answered without hesitation, 'and I'm not even curious.' Flora laughed sadly, her head tilted. 'I'll tell you anyhow,' she teased. 'Because you love me!' 'Is that obligatory in this town?' the professor asked, scowling but without anger. 'Yes,' said Flora, 'even for you.' She laughed and threw crumbs to the pigeons. 'Let's get out of here,' said the professor. That same evening they left for Rome, despite Flora's tears, threats, pleas. Would I do that today? the professor mused, and for the first time in all these years he regretted his old intransigence. Flora smiled gratefully from over the hills. . . .

'No,' said Karolinszky. 'And I'm not even curious.'

'I assure you that your attitude is of no interest to us,' said the colonel dryly. 'All we are concerned with is the facts.' From the middle drawer of his desk he took out a green

folder.

'Now then,' the major general had said, chewing at his mustache, 'our Soviet comrades discovered indications of large-scale sabotage in the medical field. The enemy has no scruples, you know. In the Soviet Union recently they had to arrest a large number of doctors who, acting under instructions from the American imperialists, actually murdered patients and even Party officials.' The colonel had said nothing. 'Our Soviet comrades believe,' continued the major general spiritedly, 'and our Politbureau agrees, that if such a thing can happen there it must be happening here too. The enemy uses the same methods everywhere. The same methods.' So be it, thought the colonel. The new spectacle—a doctors' trial. If only this fool didn't act as if he believed all this crap . . . Is he trying to teach me about the methods of the enemy? First we had the trial of the agents in the Smallholders Party who were working for Allen Dulles; then the case of the Vatican agents working for Pius XII; then came the Titoist agents working for Rankovits, which was followed by the case against the Social Democrat traitors who sold the workers down the river for British Intelligence; and finally the arms-catching *kulaks*, who worked for everybody. Hell, it's just like the song: Sunday, I'll date a hussar; Monday, a gunner . . . and Saturday, whoever is left—engineers, clerks, grocers, the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker. Is it an accident, Comrade, that there's a lot of soot in the air? No, it's not. The chimneysweepers cannot deny that they sabotaged the sweeping of the chimneys because they wanted to ruin the workers' lungs. 'The main thing,' the major general had said, 'is that our doctors must realize . . .' Yes, of course, they must realize that Socialist humanism demands . . . '*Ponimaytie, tovarish Polkovnik?*' asked General Tarakanov indulgently. '*Ya proshu vas, tovarish Polkovnik.*' They shook hands. The colonel understood perfectly. Within two weeks, he had given orders for the arrest of fourteen doctors, both Party members and non-members, one a day. It took little effort and still less imagination. He had only to scan the records of those who had some suitable flaw in their past which could be easily adapted to conform with the blueprint—the fairy tale, as he called it for himself. The example had to support the theory, not validate it; he had nothing to prove, only illustrate. The colonel worked with precision. His selection of those to be arrested represented a social cross-section that would stir hatred in the believers, silence the infidels, make the cynics think and reassure his superiors. Casting the

leading role required somewhat more effort. It had to be a man of substance, of real status and social standing, for he had to bring divergent elements together, be a focal point. Some country doctor or a pen-pusher in the Health Service wouldn't do. He had considered several possibilities: the president of the Academy of Sciences, a distinguished internist, a world-famous Catholic surgeon, a renowned psychiatrist ousted from the Party years ago. But he rejected all of them for various reasons. For a while he seemed to have come to a dead end; then chance came to his rescue. There were two very helpful developments: one, general conditions at the Cold Valley Road Hospital; the other, a man he ran across in a remote detention camp who could be beautifully linked with the prospective star. And on the same day that this prisoner was brought to Budapest by special order, another death occurred at the hospital—the fourth in a month. That resolved the colonel's internal debate; he could not pass up the opportunity. Before proposing Karolinszky's arrest to the Politbureau, he went to the hospital to evaluate the likely after-effects. As he drove out, it occurred to him that the hospital's Party Secretary might play a role in the expertly staged buildup; but when he came face to face with that scared rabbit, he was so disgusted by his shining innocence that he dropped the idea. It would be more trouble than help, he thought. Deliver us, Lord, from the faithful. Would the Party Secretary believe that Karlinszky was working for the American imperialists? Of course he would, the idiot. . . .

The colonel opened the dossier mechanically. 'The facts, my dear Professor,' he said, his good mood seeming to revive. His craving for a cigarette remained, but it was bearable. 'Aren't you ever curious about the facts?'

The professor did not reply.

'I'm really sorry that I can't arouse your interest, Professor,' said the colonel, 'but of course this won't prevent me from doing my duty, as I'm sure you will understand.' He took a closely typed page from the file at random. 'You are accused, my dear Professor, of having abused the magnanimity of the People's Democracy and our Party, using the special advantage of high position to hatch a conspiracy against the health and welfare of the People's Democratic——'

'Hatch?' the professor interrupted with a surprising show of interest. 'So we did hatch a conspiracy.'

'You like the expression?'

'It's amusing,' said the professor.

'You honor me with your approval,' said the colonel and smiled again. 'I wrote the entire text of the indictment. My superiors made only slight changes; most refreshing. But let me ask, *did* you hatch a conspiracy?'

'So we did,' Karolinszky repeated.

'You don't deny it?' prodded the colonel.

'Should I?' the professor replied. 'Say the word and I will.' He leaned back in the chair.

'As you wish, Professor. You may deny or admit it. That won't alter the facts.' He reached for the cigarette box, but pulled back his hand. 'Especially since your colleagues and friends with whom I could not hope to engage in such interesting conversation have already confessed everything anyway.'

'Everything?' the professor asked.

'I have here, for instance, the signed confession of Endre Zibolen, Jr., which states that...' The professor looked up, startled. The colonel suppressed a smile. He had expected that reaction. The machinery was operating perfectly. It was the first crack of the whip, the first blood drawn, the first indication of the abyss. The dead, thought the colonel, still have much to learn. Obedience, above all. Otherwise, what have they to live for? That's how it goes, Professor.

For a while he remained silent, then said, 'May I go on?'...

On the veranda of the hunting lodge, Dr. Endre Zibolen was sitting in front of the table covered with wineglasses. He wore his brand-new, green Loden sports jacket, and a gold pince-nez glittered on the bridge of his nose. 'If we leave, Toni,' said Dr. Endre Zibolen, 'take care of my son. Will you promise?' The professor promised nothing. It's no business of mine, he had thought.

He lowered his head and stared absent-mindedly at the deep-red Persian carpet. I'd like to sleep, he mused; but he wasn't at all sleepy. He felt keen, attentive, and at the same time filled with some kind of tart, bitterish emotion. I'm afraid, thought the professor, and, strangely enough, he was glad of it. 'Please go on,' he said then and looked out of the window. All at once, everything appeared so close. The small, fleecy cloud floating in the blue sky, the bright-green, finely veined leaves of the trees, the clang of the trolleys. The world was full of strangely glittering serenity.

'We have no reason to doubt the truthfulness of this young man's confession,' said the colonel in a quiet, pleasant voice. 'I can only hope that you will confirm everything said by the son

of your good friend and not cause me stupid difficulties as he did.' The colonel paused. Again he saw that hard, aquiline nose and tight, panting mouth. He had had his hands full. It took his men three days to break Zibolen, an unusually long time. What sense was there in that kind of resistance? He took a page from the folder. 'With your permission,' he said, 'I will now read you the confession of our youthful hero, Endre Zibolen, Jr. It's short but very enlightening. Listen.

"Not long after the liberation, I took employment in the procurement division of the American Military Mission of the Allied Control Commission in Budapest. My task at that time was to help supply American troops stationed in Hungary. Though the job was well paid, I naturally was not satisfied with my earnings and, taking advantage of the inflationary situation combined with the fact that my post afforded easy access to American supply centers, I made considerable extra money on the black market. When, in August 1946, the Party and government halted inflation and created the sound forint, I realized that my easy earnings were in danger. My hatred of democracy and the people—instilled in me by my parents—was intensified when the Party took steps to eliminate the black market. I therefore seized the opportunity to join in action aimed at the overthrow of the regime I hated. By the summer of 1946 I had made contact with a member of the American Mission, Lieutenant Colonel J. F. Smith, who asked if, in return for certain emoluments, I would undertake to supply information to which I had easy access during my procurement trips across the country. I accepted the assignment and subsequently gave reports to Lieutenant Colonel J. F. Smith on the placement of Soviet units, their supply lines, etc. This work failed to satisfy me, so I asked the lieutenant colonel what more I could do. I did not have to wait long. By the spring of 1947 it seemed that, despite all the machinations of reaction, the Party and the workers would soon take power, and this could be at best delayed but no longer prevented. On April 3, 1947, Lieutenant Colonel Smith summoned me again. He disclosed that in the view of the Americans, a Communist takeover was imminent and that they were therefore planning certain countermeasures. He described a program of sabotage and terrorist action, noting that it was necessary to prepare well for this. He informed me that the Americans had already initiated certain projects and asked if I'd be willing, under these altered conditions, to take part. I promptly acquiesced. At this stage, we did not discuss details, but when I heard of

the plan for terrorist action against the public-health organization, I remarked that, in my view, Dr. Antal Karolinszky-Thorok could be enlisted in our cause. In response to Lieutenant Colonel Smith's questions, I said I had known the professor since childhood and was sure he shared my views. Lieutenant Colonel Smith then asked me to approach Dr. Antal Karolinszky-Thorok, if I thought the time was ripe. I then phoned Dr. Karolinszky at his villa, saying I had an important message from my father which I wished to deliver personally. A week later, on April 10, 1947, I visited Dr. Karolinszky at his villa, and after a few remarks I told him why I had come. The professor listened attentively, then asked me what he would have to do if he accepted his honorable commission—that's how he phrased it: honorable. In accordance with Smith's briefing, I explained that we would count on him as our key man in the public-health sector, and his work would involve action against high government and Party leaders. I also informed him that there was no need for immediate action and in the meantime it was most important for him to avoid the limelight. Above all, he should accept no new post until so instructed by the Americans. This was a precaution to dispel suspicion, since the professor's views were well known. We knew that Dr. Karolinszky's financial situation would make it possible for him to comply. Dr. Karolinszky agreed and asked how he would receive further instructions. I said this hinged on circumstances, but assured him that the Americans would find a way. Then Dr. Karolinszky rose, smiling, and said: I am at your service. That same evening, at our usual rendezvous, I reported this success to Lieutenant Colonel Smith, who expressed his satisfaction and then . . ." Et cetera, et cetera,' concluded the colonel. 'What do you say to that, Professor?' He looked at him with curiosity.

'Excellent,' the professor remarked after a while. 'Congratulations.'

'Rather primitive,' said the colonel. 'As I read it, it seems a bit primitive.'

'Not at all,' said the professor. 'Simple. Clear. Unequivocal. I was quite carried away by it. All those splendid plans. Who would have thought we'd fail so miserably?'

'We're getting older,' said the colonel.

'Why don't you have a cigarette?' the professor asked.

'The doctors . . .'

'Never mind them,' said the professor. 'Just quacks. Do you miss smoking?'

'Terribly.'

'Your blood pressure?' the professor asked.

'Over two hundred,' said the colonel. 'I have dizzy spells.'

'No excitement. Rest, relax.'

'Who can, these days?'

'Nitromin?'

'Yes.'

'Not worth much. Just temporary. Under treatment?'

'At your hospital. They told me to go swimming every morning. Four or five lengths at the Lukacs pool.'

'The trial?'

'Secret. A communiqué will appear Sunday in all the papers.'

'You should try tennis. On a shaded court.'

'With my heart?'

'A little training. How about Zibolen?'

'He will be hanged, I'm sorry to say.'

'Who else?'

'Dr. Paul Kelemen. Health Insurance. Fifteen years.'

'Zoltan?'

'That scared rabbit? Maybe next time.'

'He's honest. That's his trouble.'

'It depends on whom we call honest.'

'Those who lay traps only for themselves.'

'And stumble into them? Excellent. Dr. Laszlo Salgo at the Csepel Iron Works. Know him?'

'Of course. Didn't you know that he and I planned to blow up the Martin furnace? How much?'

'Ten years.'

'Well, well. And next?'

'Miklos Farkas.'

'One of my gynecologists. Used to know his father. When was he arrested?'

'Not yet. Just a good prospect. That's why we had him transferred. In case we need him.'

'But what are you waiting for?'

'We have a full house. Sold out.'

'Let's drink to that. Be my guest.'

'Where?'

'At my place tonight.'

'When?'

'After nine. It'll be a nice evening. We can sit on the terrace. I had supper out there the other day. Very pleasant.'

'After nine, then. I won't forget.'

'You know my address. If something comes up, just phone.'

'What could come up?'

'At our age one never knows.'

'You frighten me, Professor. But I'm already dead, anyway.'

'And who is alive?'

'You're right. No one, no one.'

The colonel held out his hand. But the professor was gone. Through the open door came a sharp, cold draft. Lucky that at least a few ghosts are alive, thought the colonel, and quickly lit a cigarette.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Mikecz awoke early; it wasn't even eleven. He tried to fall asleep again, but it was no use. Picking up a book from the night table, he tried to read; that didn't work either. He was almost out of cigarettes too. The feeling that something was missing nagged him; the more he sought to shake it off, the more tenaciously it dug into his consciousness. Cursing, he rolled off the bed and flapped around the room, disheveled and unwashed, with a sour taste in his mouth. The walls stared at him vacantly.

Finally he made himself wash and shave, but found no relief. He felt as if he had been entrusted with some sort of message and had forgotten not only its content but also whom he was supposed to deliver it to. The disquieting thing was a gradual realization that he was not supposed to deliver but to receive the message. But he would be able to receive it only if he could remember who was to transmit it. In the quicksand of his confusion he swayed toward the mirror, grabbed the first object within reach and smashed it to the floor. As the crack of sound shattered the iron silence around him, he sighed with relief. Only then did he look to see what he had broken. His wife's thick white comb lay before him in two pieces, its teeth intact.

Later, on the boulevard, he stopped and lit a cigarette; then, leaning against a kiosk, he absently watched the loaded trucks heading out of the city, the creaky old taxis, the jolting, empty streetcars which seemed to float with brash lightness now

between rush hours. The aimless, senseless morning stretched sleepily at his feet like a big lazy cat. Other days at this hour he'd still be in bed, leafing through old books, smoking or quietly musing, for since breaking with Anna, his mistress, four months ago—had he tired of her, or had he just become fed up with her insinuations about other male visitors?—the equilateral triangle of his life (the plant, Anna's room and his home) had turned into a straight line, a pendulum swing between the Martin furnace and his bedroom. That line was interrupted more and more rarely by an occasional jaunt to the little tavern at the foot of the bridge next to the rail terminal. It was not just that the wine had become worse, but his thirst had abated: he hated being drunk more than being sober. So why drink?

For a while he loitered at the corner, then slowly ambled on. The sun already stood high. It was hot. As he crossed to the shady side of the street, he caught sight of a telephone booth. Instantly, as if he had been preparing for it all day, he entered the booth and looked up the name of the doctor.

It was an old, three-story apartment house. The arched gate was ornamented with broken plaster caryatids, and grim Atlases gaped beneath the gutters. From a window a thin voice dived down into the broad, deserted street, and the suddenly rising wind swept it afar, along with the sheets of newspaper, apple cores, trampled matchboxes and cigarette butts littering the walk. His eyes and mouth filled with scratchy warm dust. He turned in at the gate and looked for the nameplate.

But there was none. In the drafty entrance opening to the staircase on the right with its worn, imitation marble steps, he found only an empty wooden frame labeled LIST OF TENANTS which at one time probably gave the names of those who dwelt there. He looked around, irresolute, and the corridors, the blind staring windows, the huge old sumac tree in front appeared to him like a recollection from the age of amoebas floating on primeval waters, formidable and familiar, incomprehensible and sad; like the uncountable years which preceded and will yet follow; like the face peering from behind the worn chintz curtains of the janitor's window, the ringed eyes, the bony nose, the thin cramped mouth. The lone shame of futility billowed over him, transmitting the message of a reality behind reality, the danger signals of an organism on the verge of exhaustion. With his handkerchief he wiped his neck, then walked slowly, laboriously toward the stairs.

At the first landing knelt a heap of bright rags. It was the charwoman, dispelling and again herding together a mass of dirty gray suds. Occasionally she would fasten the red kerchief that kept slipping off her white hair, then reach again for the scrub brush, absorbed in her work. The soap bubbles not only separated her from the world but the world from her. Mikecz watched with quiet, sincere compassion; what would happen if the bubble burst?

'Excuse me,' he said very softly, 'could you tell me . . .'

She half turned her head, then straightened out, stretching and wheezing like a great bird preening its feathers. From under the red kerchief her nose suddenly popped out, a prodigious, hard-swollen potato nose, a beak in blue-lilac hues. Above it kindled the shivery smile of invisible bird eyes. 'What would you eat from two empty plates, young man?' she asked in an unexpectedly deep, rasping voice which reminded Mikecz of some sound that animals and infants, lacking words, might use to express a terrible need. He stared at her, and before he could answer she spoke again. 'Watch it, the water's dripping on your shoes.'

Mikecz stepped back. 'Could you tell me whether the doctor is at home?' he asked quickly.

The smile in the bird eyes went out, the swollen beak quivered, the face lost its color and gleamed wanly. 'Second floor, Number two,' croaked the ragbird and again reached for the scrub brush. 'Right by the stairs. Don't hold me back, please. How should I know if he's home? My job is to wash the stairs. Look for yourself.'

Her head vanished among the towering rags; only her varicose bluish feet jutted out from below her soaked petticoat. It burst, he thought numbly.

There on the big brown wooden door of Number 2 on the second floor was the doctor's nameplate. Mikecz knocked twice, softly. No sound. I'll ring, he thought, and if there's still no answer, then there's nothing . . . Or is there really something only if nobody answers? He leaned on the bell. From inside came a quick, angry slamming of doors.

'Who's there?' asked a sleepy, soft woman's voice. 'Stop it, for God's sake!' The shuffling neared the door, then suddenly ceased. A cat was crouched at his feet, its back arched, mewing.

'What do you want?' asked the voice. Now it was hoarse and dour.

'I'd like to see Comrade Salgo,' said Mikecz quickly.

'Comrade Salgo?' The voice rose, then sank with a laugh. 'He's not home. Out of town.'

'When will he be back?'

'To hell with you,' said the voice.

'I came from the plant,' Mikecz said. He felt himself flushing. 'I have an important message.'

'Keep it,' came the giggling reply. 'Keep it, plant comrade.'

'Damn it,' he cried. 'Open up, or do you want me to break in?' In his rage he struck the door with his fist. The cat squalled in alarm. 'What are you playing with me for?'

'It's death that's playing with you,' said the voice. 'Who did you bring a message from?'

'I'll tell you when you let me in,' Mikecz replied.

'It doesn't matter,' said the voice.

'But it does,' he said. 'Open up.'

'Not so fast,' said the voice. 'Who are you?'

'Open the door,' he said. 'We're disturbing the whole house.'

'So what?' said the voice. 'They like a free circus. Do you have any elephants with you?'

'Yes,' said the smelter. 'I also brought two tortoises.'

'There are acrobats living here,' said the woman. 'Have you any skill at that?'

'Yes,' Mikecz answered. 'I can do the *salto mortale* three times in a row. Will that do?'

'Couldn't be better,' said the voice. 'Why didn't you say so in the first place?' The door suddenly swung open.

Wavy blonde hair, high white brow, flushed face, full strong mouth, sleepily shining gray eyes, thin arms, nervous fingers with a life of their own, a full-length dressing gown in a flowery print, slender ankles and high-heeled slippers. Mikecz stopped short at the threshold in clumsy surprise.

'Come on in,' said the woman. 'Come in. As long as there's life there's hope, right? But what happens when the rope breaks?'

Mikecz still didn't move. At his feet he felt a warm snuggling. The cat was rubbing against him.

'Are you here too?' she asked. She kicked the animal hard and it fled. 'That's what happens to traitors,' she said then, with an immobile face from which the blood had suddenly drained. 'Let's see the tortoises, Comrade.' She pointed toward the entrance hall. 'A modest middle-class home with better taste than average. Light-blue walls. Rag rug. A few pictures, just cheap reproductions. Mihaly Munkacsy's *Strikers* there on the far wall. Demonstrates loyalty to the working class. Are

you from the plant?' With narrowed eyes she followed Mikecz's gaze: above a closet door hung huge stag antlers gathering dust. 'Those trophies are the last remnants of a bourgeois life, left for posterity by my father-in-law. A Jewish lawyer who went hunting. Isn't that revolting? Like a Jewish doctor who——'

'Please,' said Mikecz stiffly.

The woman stood next to him. He sensed her fragrance. 'Forgive me,' she said. Her dressing gown parted. She wasn't wearing a brassiere. Naked beneath the dressing gown, Mikecz thought; she's stark naked.

'I'd like to see Comrade Salgo,' he said hoarsely. 'Could you tell me when he'll get back?' Since he'd broken off with Anna ... He turned his head away.

She stood in front of a door as if defending it. 'He left no message, Comrade,' she answered gaily. 'Had to pack in a hurry, you know.'

Mikecz felt as if they'd jammed his body into some narrow cold tube. Now he knew what had happened. And he remembered that he had already known that morning, yesterday afternoon, too, and a year before; so long as he lived he had known, no matter how much he would have liked to forget it, no matter how hard he tried to direct his thoughts elsewhere; he knew what only the dead know when they understand that they must perish anew.

'Where did he go?' he asked very loudly, as if trying with one last effort to free himself.

But the woman wasn't paying any attention. She had opened the kitchen door and a powerful broad beam of light rushed into the entrance hall. 'Would you like a cup of coffee or a drink?' she asked in a surprisingly tender tone. Then, as if ashamed of herself, she gave a short, quick laugh. 'That is, if the cupboard isn't bare. The circus has closed. They've struck the tents. The comrades don't come any more.' With her right foot she suddenly kicked open the door to the doctor's office. 'But perhaps he left you some message, some note, especially for you. It should be here somewhere.'

The darkness fell upon him suddenly. Mikecz couldn't see anything, but he knew where he was and somehow he wanted everything to continue this way; the darkness protected him from the hatred and helplessness breaking within him. As if aware that fear must be banished, the woman pulled up the blinds and light filled every corner of the room with the certainty and simplicity given only to natural phenomena. The

room was a sea of books, newspapers, empty vials, broken pictures, notebook pages, ashtrays. Amidst the chaos rose the examination table, covered with a white cloth, and in the corner a writing desk with a small plaster bust of Stalin on top of it. The door of the big yellow tile stove stood open; cigarette butts showed black among the ashes and bits of half-burned coal from last season.

Mikecz stood silently in the doorway, not entering the room.

For a while the woman poked about the desk as though really seeking a note or message which would explain why Laszlo Salgo had to rush off without saying goodbye and why he didn't know when he'd be back. Then she suddenly straightened, her face flaming with anger.

'Why are you standing there like that?' she cried. 'Look for it!' She kicked at the mounds of books lying around her. A cloud of dust rose around her bright slipper. 'Look for it! Can't you hear me, stupid?'

Mikecz was just about to turn on his heel to escape the whole bright nightmare when, with a simple-mindedness that surprised him he entered the room and began to rummage in the disorderly pile. A strange compulsion: it forbade him to think and at the same time, for a few fleeting moments, it made him believe that he really was looking for the...

'Do you believe it now?' she asked. 'He left no message for you. And even if he had, who could find it in this mess?' She was standing at a small wallpapered door on the far side of the room. 'Why are you staring at me, Comrade? Come.' She turned and disappeared behind the wallpapered door.

Mikecz followed after the woman without a single backward glance.

Half-drawn blinds, the smell of face powder, perspiration, brandy. A twin-door, brown polished wardrobe. Cut-glass, oval dressing-table mirror. Pink-shaded reading lamp on the low night table, craned upward. An old brass-embossed wardrobe, its drawers empty.

She was already lying on the double bed, the covers drawn up to her neck as though she were cold. Her pale face melted into the white creases of the pillow. She reached for the brandy bottle. 'Pour,' she said without looking at him. Blue marks defaced her lean arms. The smelter poured a swallow of brandy into the lipstick-stained glass. She laughed. 'Are you afraid, Comrade? More. Fill it up! For yourself, too, do you

hear? You'll find a glass by the mirror.' Mikecz didn't budge. 'What's up, Comrade?' she asked brightly. 'Aren't you drinking?'

'No,' he said.

'In other words, you're going to let me get drunk by myself, like a pig.'

'Yes,' said Mikecz.

'At least you're frank.' She smiled and gave a shrug. 'Wait,' she said abruptly, as if to cut ahead of his silence. 'I will read your thoughts, Comrade. You wonder at this brandy being here, right? Well, I'm a bourgeois witch; I just wave and it materializes. Now you can hop straight over to the A.V.H. and report that Mrs. Salgo has a bottle of French brandy.' She clutched the glass so hard it nearly splintered, and drank from it in quick, awkward gulps. Her eyes filled with tears. 'It's not even French,' she said after that, very softly.

She put down the glass. 'You think that I'm drinking to drown my woes. The doctor's wife, in her sorrow, drinks herself to death. But you're wrong. I'm drinking to celebrate. At last I'm free of that dope, that hopeless...' She stared at the glass. 'Sit down, here, on the edge of the bed, Comrade. Don't worry, I'm the wife of a first-class Communist. It's safe. Come closer!' She drank with trembling lips. 'Are you married?'

'Yes,' said Mikecz.

'Great,' said the woman. 'Your wife undoubtedly works for the glory of the proletariat. You think maybe I didn't work for the Party?' She forced a laugh and drew the quilt to her neck. 'He married me on condition that I join the Party, imagine! A rich factory owner's daughter raised by the nuns, and the Party! Some joke. He set conditions because Dr. Salgo was a man of character. I set none when I hid him in the cellar from the Nazis and became his woman. But I loved him, see, just plain bourgeois style, without conditions. You know how he wanted to use me? For door-to-door agitation. You should have heard how he used to talk to me! I didn't understand historical necessity, dialectics, the role of the individual in society. He said I was stupid, selfish and hostile. Because I chose the wrong father? But then why did he marry me? Do you understand that?'

'No,' said Mikecz.

'Door-to-door agitation! But do you think he raised a finger when my parents were deported? No, Comrade, not this champion of humanity. He said, here in this bed, lying next to the daughter of the factory owner who had been yanked out of

his pajamas at four A.M. and shoved onto a truck, and he said, too bad, too bad, but I must see that class war is class war and the proletarian dictatorship isn't child's play. Are you a Communist, Comrade?'

'Yes,' said Mikecz.

'What a question,' she said. 'It could only occur to a reactionary like me. Every worker is a Communist, or if he isn't he'll turn into one: that's the way Dr. Salgo trained me to believe. And he certainly knew. Evenings, he'd return from the plant with shining eyes; I should have heard the comments that day, then I wouldn't doubt that the workers . . . Right, I said, I'm sure that the class consciousness of the workers mounts by the hour, but then there's the loss of Belgrade and the fact that I need a new skirt; I'm ashamed even to go marketing in the old one. What did he answer? He said that as long as the working women must make do with the skirts they have, I shouldn't complain . . .' She was almost shouting. On her brow, on her straight narrow nose, around her mouth, small drops of perspiration beaded. 'Well, I'm through listening to his lectures, his dialectics, his friends. No more making coffee till two in the morning, goodbye to all that talking, no more! I'm free, do you hear, free. . . . Why don't you come closer to me?' She stretched out on the bed, uncovered.

Beneath the soft pink transparence of the nightgown the body first tensed, then relaxed, just as if her muscles had surrendered in the diffused warm meld of brandy, perspiration, Cologne and bedding. Mikecz still saw this and then, with a precipitateness whose savagery staggered him a moment, he lunged at her in a daze of revulsion and desire. A sharp blind pain pierced his neck. Beneath him, in the foggy depths, a pair of enormously dilated gray eyes flashed dissembling hatred; two dank palms, clinging to his shirt, flung him to the other end of the bed.

'What's the idea?' she screeched, her voice breaking as if from exhaustion. 'Who do you think I am? You think you can have me just because you're a proletarian, a Communist?' She sank back deathly pale.

Mikecz fumbled for his handkerchief and pressed it to his neck. The blood drenched the white cotton. For a while he still sat at the foot of the bed, his head swimming. Then he got up and made for the door. Her voice, whose rearing despair mingled with a queer self-disdain, bored into his back, but he did not turn.

'Don't go,' she cried. 'Are you mad at me? Don't go away,

please don't.' Her voice fell again as if she had realized that this final effort to convince herself that life still had need of her was utterly vain. 'Don't leave me alone. Come back. I'll explain. I haven't had anybody to talk to for three days. Can't you understand? For three days.'

Mikecz stopped at the stairwell a moment to wipe the blood from his neck once more. From inside the apartment a chaos of noises filtered to him: hoarse shouting, the slamming of doors, crashing glass. He ran down the steps two at a time. The ragbird flew off into nowhere. Only a small patch of water glittered on the worn red stones.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

'Give me my ball, lady,' the little girl said, pulling at Rezi's skirt. 'I'll tell my mummy on you.'

Rezi did not reply. She clutched the small, worn rubber ball tightly in her right hand and started to throw it far away, then suddenly changed her mind and hid it behind her back. The little girl looked up at Rezi; in her light-green eyes, surprise changed to fear. The rays of the sun behind her were like huge hairpins in her flaming hair; the bony little face was in the shadow and the snow-white skin had a grayish tint, freckles nesting around the turned-up nose.

'Lady, please, please,' the little girl murmured, wrinkling up her nose.

Rezi just stared at her, unrelenting, for a very long time. The sky was a glass bell, hanging over the carefully mown lawns, the flowering lilac bushes, the beds of iridescent irises and budding roses. She sat on a bench facing the colonnade of the onetime High Court, the end of a long and aimless walk through the city. Leaving Toni's villa behind in the spring foliage, she had waited for a bus and, when it didn't come, started to walk down the wide slope, passing houses, streets, red clay tennis courts, terraces, gnarled old streets. She felt that the inanimate city had more compassion for her than all its inhabitants. Not that she minded wandering so much; she didn't feel tired. There was nothing she had to do, no place to arrive at and, above all, nobody to worry about any more.

Beyond the glass bell a streetcar went by jingling softly, and

when the sound faded, warm silence took over again. Looking at the fear in the eyes of the little girl standing before her, she felt strangely pleased. For a moment the red hair, the green eyes, the turned-up nose reminded her of somebody. Who was it? Rezi shrugged apathetically. The world around her was empty, deaf and deserted. The passing of time was marked only by soft faraway ticking, and that was the last link connecting her with herself. Broken noses, hands, ears, mouths, teeth, foreheads, palms, remainders of hips and shoulders glided before her mind's eye. They had no connection with anybody or anything; they had lost not only their context but also their meanings, their characteristics which were hidden behind insane colors and curves. All this did not matter any more; on the contrary, it filled her with a quiet curiosity and the excitement of fresh emotion. Yet she sat listlessly in the warm haze, clutching the dilapidated rubber ball with one hand and supporting her head with the other. How long had she been there? She could not say. The ticking stopped. Rezi stretched and listened to the crackle of her bones.

The little girl stood patiently at the far end of the bench. Suddenly Rezi shifted the hand holding the ball. The eyes of the child flickered.

'Want it?' Rezi asked.

'Yes,' the child answered under her breath.

'Yes or no?' Rezi held the ball high. The moist earth on it had started to rust and the ball began to look like a mummified head. The little girl remained silent. 'Can't you talk?' asked Rezi. 'If you want me to give it back, ask for it nicely.'

'Please,' said the child very softly and stared at the ball.

'Say it nicely,' said Rezi. 'Where are your manners?' The little girl looked at Rezi and her eyes flickered with venomous green hatred. Rezi reddened. 'Why don't you ask for it nicely?' She felt a tremor in the pit of her stomach, in her bowels and her brain. She felt as if somebody had hit her over the head with a blunt object. The pale little face, the bony arms, the child's red blouse, her lemon-colored skirt, the tattered blue socks, the down-at-the-heels brown shoes all began to swirl languorously.

'Why should I?' said the child, and her nostrils were narrow and trembling. 'Just give me back my ball, you old whore.'

'What did you say?' Rezi asked and laughed. Her mind swirled with a curious satisfaction and then a new desire. The little girl was very close now. I only have to reach for her, she thought. She won't be able to run away. I could hold her by the

ears. Will she howl? She trembled. 'What did you say?' The child did not reply. 'All right,' said Rezi. 'So you are very rude. Well, you won't get your ball back. I'll take it with me and play with it at home in my garden. Who taught you such language?'

'Shall I ask you nicely?' said the little girl, brushing her hair back with a swift, sly movement. She squatted down at the edge of the grass and dipped her fingers in the earth. 'I'm a good girl,' she stammered, frightened.

'Very good indeed,' said Rezi. 'Of course, you're the nicest little girl in the world.' She bent forward and stared into the little girl's face. 'You little rat,' she spit out. The upturned nose swelled, the freckles were all aflame, the finely arched mouth curled. Should I push in her nose? What if I pinched the nostrils and stopped her from breathing? Rezi leaned back again. Her neck, palms and armpits were damp with perspiration. 'Why didn't you ask me nicely sooner? You could have had it. I think I'll tell on you. You have a foul mouth, haven't you? And you deserve a good spanking.'

The swirl suddenly accelerated, carrying the entire square with it. The rosebushes tilted and the fleshy petals of the irises waved confusedly, gyrating around an invisible axis, but everything beyond the glass bell remained static: the arcades of the Ministry of Agriculture, the colonnade of the High Court, the Gothic turrets of the Parliament, the cafés, cars, pedestrians, all refused to comply with her giddiness. It was frightening, like a strange face looking back at you from the mirror, like the growing nails and hair of a corpse, like ... Rezi clutched the arm of the bench. 'Your mother, where is she?' She let the ball fall. It rolled under the bench. But she did not make any effort to recover it.

'Working,' said the child softly, looking at the ball. 'May I pick it up?'

Rezi suddenly raised her head. The merry-go-round stopped instantly.

The nose, thought Rezi. And her nose and ears. And the arms, legs and the belly. 'Come closer,' she said hoarsely. 'If you come here, you can pick up your ball.' The child hesitated. 'Are you afraid?' asked Rezi sternly. 'Then I'll take it away.' She moved, showing that she was going. 'Are you coming?' Her feet were like lead; she could not have moved even if she had wanted to.

But the child did not seem to notice. 'Don't take it, please don't. I'm four years old now and my grandmother said she'd

box my ears if I lost the ball.'

'Your ears?' Rezi asked and laughed loudly. 'Your grandmother is right. Such an expensive ball! You're a little tramp, that's what you are. It's not even your ball.'

'It is,' said the child and winced. 'I got it as a present.'

'You stole it,' said Rezi. 'I'll turn you over to the police and they'll put you in a cell.'

'Don't tell them,' the little girl said. 'I have to go home to dinner.' Her face had turned yellow.

'You're lying,' said Rezi and her voice faltered with a strange, sensual pleasure. She buried her hands in the flaming red hair. 'You think you can get away with it, don't you?' Wildly she pulled the little girl toward her, leaving red scratch marks on the child's face with her fingernails.

'Ouch, please, lady, don't pull my hair. Leave me alone, please.'

'Does it hurt?'

'Yes,' cried the little girl.

'I'll hurt you much more.' Rezi panted. 'I won't let you go until you admit you stole it.'

'It was a present,' panted the child.

Suddenly Rezi let go of the child's hair and snatched her arm. It was thin and fragile. And then the child lifted her delicate head, and Rezi saw in the well of the eyes a mixture of wondering incomprehension and a kind of admiration. She felt that the child was offering her friendship, a friendship which bore the seal of mutual suffering. Rezi smiled bitterly. The face of the child lit up with relief and uncertain joy. 'Do you believe me now, lady?' she asked very softly. 'Will you let me go?'

But Rezi no longer heard what the little girl was saying. Her body pulsated with a desire to beat the child, tear her apart, feel the raw flesh, the muscles, the hard resistance of her bones. She saw the child's body melt away under relentless blows, semitransparent and trembling, but she went on beating until it oozed disgustingly around her fingers and Rezi thought how human suffering could be relieved only by causing more suffering. She hit away with no awareness of anything except this strange body and the familiar pain which gives an aim to suffering, which dissolves the fear of death.

After his long sterile talk with Mrs Mikecz, Istvan Lautenburg had ruffled the papers on his desk for a while, then sprang up impulsively and told Aliz Weszelka he had to go right over to the Ministry of Agriculture, where he had urgent

business at the office of farm contracts, thus laying himself wide open to suspicion, since it was common knowledge that direct contacts between the Canning Authority and the Ministry had been severed months ago by edict No. 182/52. M.E.

When he stepped out from the entrance to the Ministry around noon and looked across the vast, nearly deserted square, glimpsed a crowd gathered not far from the lace-turreted Parliament building, heard the high-pitched women's screams mixed with indignant male voices, he stopped for a moment and then, suppressing his usual curiosity, abruptly turned left (though his battered prewar Mercedes awaited him to the right), thereby missing the last opportunity in his life to talk with Rezi Karolinszky.

Was it pure chance that he missed her? Or was it a natural inevitability, since he had for years avoided such street scenes with a caution born of experience? But if he had known that Rezi was standing there on the far side of the square in the midst of the noisy throng, would he have gone to her? Or would he have turned away even then with assumed indifference? Could there have been some secret intangible dialectical connection between the missed opportunity and the chaotic world of his own?

The Lord had brought Istvan Lautenburg many trials but spared him, ultimately, from having to answer these questions. Filled with unusual peace, he looked back once again toward the crowd and resumed his walk. 'If difficulties exist for us to overcome them,' Gortvai used to say to him, quoting Stalin, when the two of them were alone after some heated production conference, 'then opportunities exist so as to be missed. Again we failed to knock off Mrs. Mikecz, my friend. But what would life be without missed opportunities?' Absolutely tasteless, Lautenburg thought to himself, still smiling, like someone who has cleverly avoided a trap.

Upon being informed by Angela of the professor's arrest, Dr. Feldheimer threw down his instruments, slammed the door of his consultation room, ran from the hospital and hopped the first bus that came along. In this age of our glorious revolution, he thought, we are not confronted by the ruthless laws of inevitability which they so assiduously proclaim at the Party schools, nor even by that determinism in which our ancestors deemed to discover God's will, but by a bleak, senseless chance which draws all of us into its hidden current,

pushing ahead or pulling back, lifting, then dropping, arbitrarily, unpredictably. Was it inevitable that they took Karolinszky, who surely would have seemed the most protected among us? Not at all. Was it reason, then? Far from it. Would it have made any difference if they had arrested me instead of Karolinszky? Or you, Zoltanovich? Or you, Dr. Wass? No. Our Party merely overlooked an opportunity or, rather, substituted one opportunity for another, one chance for another. The sum total is the same. Waiter, the check, please. I had a slice of treason, a medium-done deviation and some idealistic regression topped with unruliness. Twenty years' hard labor? That's reasonable.

The bus jolted and Feldheimer looked up. They were at the Margit Bridge on the Buda side of the city. Below street level, the local train to Szentendre was ready to pull out. The conductor signaled all clear and blew a whistle shrilly. If I run, thought Feldheimer, I can still catch it. This chance I am not willing to miss. The train was already moving as he swung aboard, panting heavily. He sat down in an empty compartment, riding backward, though it always made him vomit. What would have happened, he mused almost happily, if the bus hadn't stopped? If I hadn't looked up, or the train had just left? I know, I know, I'm oversimplifying. But what else can I do when there is no longer any connection between chance and reality? Should I hang myself? I'd rather vomit. He leaned back in his seat with closed eyes but felt no nausea.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The judge was a rather short, squat, muscular man of middle age whose hair had started to thin in the past few months. His determined angular face was not wild or brutish but relaxed, almost gentle. He buttoned and unbuttoned his navy-blue jacket, adjusted his steel-gray silk tie, smoothed his snow-white nylon shirt. The judge belonged to that class of men who tried to offset the wrinkles of approaching age by wearing immaculate clothes.

He covered the distance to the door with small, rapid steps to make absolutely sure that it was really closed. His secretary had probably been away from her desk when Rezi arrived;

otherwise she certainly would have announced such a prominent guest with that cramped, malevolent little smile around her pinched nose. But now she must be desperately breaking her stubborn head on the other side of the door.

He returned to his desk without even a glance at Rezi crouching in the big leather armchair and began to shuffle the dusty reports in front of him nervously. The situation was definitely an awkward one and silly. He should have been prepared for this visit but he wasn't. He glanced cautiously at Rezi, who was staring into space. This, of course, was bad, far worse than if she was chattering all kinds of nonsense. Silence, thought the judge, is desirable because it doesn't require answers, but it also lends itself to misinterpretation. Questions, on the other hand, lead to definite statements which can completely satisfy. So if anybody is silent, one must ask questions urgently, get answers and answer the answers. The judge became very restless in his chair.

Four days ago he had been quietly informed of Karolinszky's arrest. Since then he had been constantly wondering what would happen when the professor's sister, whom he hadn't seen for the last ten years (she was always such an unhappy-looking and neutral being), suddenly appeared and started asking questions, and then she took him by surprise. What carelessness! He sighed. Serves me right, though. He leaned back in the chair and looked across the low smoking table with its ugly ceramic ashtrays, at the dusty filing cabinets, dilapidated carpet, the rubber plant in the corner, the round face with sideburns à la Emperor Franz Joseph in the simple brown frame on the wall. It was the old judge, whose deep-blue eyes bore into him whenever he signed a death sentence. The furniture had been rearranged and the walls repapered, but he had never dared to take down that oil portrait for fear the old judge would return to haunt the place in revenge. The former Party Secretary of the Ministry of Justice, Charlie Tormas, had casually remarked once, 'That old reactionary has no place in this room, Comrade. I know he was your teacher and friend, but I would have got rid of that picture a long time ago. You know that the legal machinery of the proletariat has nothing in common with the legal machinery of the bourgeoisie' (under the auspices of which poor Charlie had been hanged six months later). Anyhow, he had kept the portrait—perhaps as a secret witness not only of his cowardice and humiliation but also as a witness who will know and understand that sometimes a man has to pronounce death sentences

rather than be condemned himself. But is there any real difference?

He glanced at Rezi again, cautiously and a bit worried. Quite pretty, he thought with surprise, prettier than I remember. How did she happen to come here? Why in heaven did she pick on me? The answers to these questions were of no interest to him since they could shed light only on the obvious phenomenon of her presence, of how he had got into this mess, but they could in no way get him out of it.

Earlier that morning everything had seemed to be in perfect order. He had succeeded in getting his wife and two children off to visit Grandmother on the seven-twenty train to Sumeg. The old lady had a little house on the edge of town. Swinging in the old rocker with a faded smile around her wrinkled mouth, she was still living in the world of twenty years ago, in the age of the thousand-acre estate, the fifteen-room manor house, the staff of servants, the endless stream of guests. Small wonder that poor Agnes didn't like staying there very long. But think of the children, he would say; we can't let them spend the summer in the heat of the capital when they could be in the country, and very cheaply at that. Agnes would sniff a little and start packing. He had taken them to the Southern Station by cab, which was one of the main attractions of the journey for the boys, and waved them off with his white handkerchief. I'm free for four months; the whole world belongs to me, he thought. Of course I'm going to see them two or three times. Two or three times—that will be the correct number. On his way back from the station he had walked slowly across the Field of Blood in the hazy sunshine. I have four months of freedom, four months of total freedom, I'm in no hurry, I can take all the time I want. Only barbarians drain their brandy at one gulp. By God, there are so many pretty women, so many lonely ones, hungering for men and waiting for . . . The judge admitted among friends that he was a hedonist.

Later, he had stopped at one spot in the subway construction and looked around for a few moments. The builders' huts, the scaffolding, the reinforced concrete, the hills of sand and gradually rusting drills stood lonely and desolate in the middle of the green meadow. There are people who say that this will be the fastest and most modern subway in Europe. They are right. There are others who swear that it won't ever be finished because you can't build a subway in this terrain and it never should have been tried. They are right too. Others keep saying that it's all a huge bluff, propaganda. Why shouldn't they be

right? Still others insist that the whole story about building a subway is a clever camouflage to enable Soviet troops to cross under the Danube in the event of war. That may be true. So we have the believers and the unbelievers. I don't belong to any of them. To be free of commitments is the full commitment: to oneself. Who is really interested in anybody else? Otherwise I'm fully and wholeheartedly for the cause.

The judge got off the bus at the Public Prosecutor's office on High Street; he had a little job to do there before going to his office. The guard at the entrance saluted him stiffly and the doorman opened the gate. They know me here, he thought, and adjusted his tie. The doormen, the prison guards, the prisoners, the hangmen, everybody. I am well known and that's the truth. Truth? It was the first time after weeks of resignation that a kind of cold revulsion swept through him. He tried hard to shrug it off while the chief jailer showed him the way to the cell. He nearly fell on the threshold. The relentlessly searching eyes were looking at him and the sharp foxlike nose started to vibrate. He loathed that unpleasant face.

As he had foreseen, he had an easy job with Dr. Stanislas Verbenyi, the onetime Chief Master of the Regnum Marianum Boy Scouts and a former Franciscan monk. Verbenyi just sat on his cot, his hands folded and his thin lips pressed together. The judge looked at him for a while. What can I do with him? It would be useless, of course, to tell him that we are on the verge of his trial and it would be better if he started talking. But he won't, the fool. These days scoutmasters don't have it so good, especially if they are also Franciscan monks. My God! He's accused of having sought contact with agents of the American imperialists and of arranging secret meetings to corrupt and mislead our precious youth. I'm glad I don't feel like giving him a death sentence. The message that came day before yesterday from Secret Police headquarters prescribed hard labor for life. Which is a lot better than hanging, he thought. The judge wondered about the mildness of the sentence—so unusual, but they know what they're doing. All I do is read out the tidings. Yes, darling, I've become a town crier!

When he got to his chambers he read the files on the spying activities of the Regnum Marianum scoutmaster and quickly became bored with the questions, the answers, every false note. Then he began to think about Karolinszky. That fellow was always in trouble, the judge thought, even at school. He

remembered an old gentleman with gold-rimmed glasses and a mincing gait who pouted and informed the Upper Fourth that yesterday the faculty had considered the matter of Antal Karolinszky-Thorok's unjustified absences and the fact that he had been seen walking with an unidentified school girl on Margaret Island. What made the whole thing even worse was that Karolinszky had absolutely refused to divulge her name, whereupon the faculty had decided to expel Karolinszky. However—the old gentleman paused and coughed—the sentence would be suspended in view of the excellent scholastic record of the accused, who would be put on probation, of course. Karolinszky had shrugged and three days later cut class again. Of course he was never expelled. And it had been the same way at the university, in the Army and during his first years of practice. Why? Was he lucky? Did he always manage to have good connections? Or was he merely able to impose his will on everybody with that cold taciturnity of his? The judge had never given much thought to it. Their friendship over the years (if you can call a link between two indifferences a friendship) was founded on the unspoken agreement that neither of them interfere with the other. This was sufficient to keep them from drifting apart. The silent, aggressive indifference of the professor complemented the wise, gay avoidance by the judge of everything which could have disturbed his equanimity.

When he had first heard about Karolinszky's arrest, he had shivered with real fright. Unfortunately their friendship had been very well known, and in spite of the fact that there had not been any real contact between them for years, one never could know who would remember it and start digging.... Dear Comrade Horvai, I am telling you I cut all ties with Karolinszky years ago, because I was in no doubt whatsoever that this surgeon, otherwise of exceptional talent, is an enemy of our system. I must also tell you that I felt some anxiety when the Party decided to nominate him director of the hospital.... No, that won't go down well; somebody might ask, Why didn't I speak up *then*? my failure to perform my duty is proof that I was unable to get rid of the remnants of my upbringing and education, both being upper middle class—that old snag. On the other hand, what would have happened to me if I had disclosed my doubts? 'The typical bourgeois behaviour of Comrade Solthy has been expressed in his very negative attitude toward everything, and this new example proves that he does not understand the problems of democratic

centralism which . . . ' Would I have told them that I last saw him at a bridge party arranged by Mrs. Fellner, when he sailed off with his pretty partner after the second rubber, thereby doing exactly what I had wanted to do?

The judge leaned against the brown window frame. A slight headache proceeded from the center of his brain toward the frontal lobes. He tried to stop it by pressing his thumb against his eyelids, but the vibration wouldn't stop. What's the matter? He couldn't think about it clearly because he was listening to Rezi breathing behind his back. Had she fainted? Or only fallen asleep? Must be asleep, he thought without turning around. That's all I needed. This silence is lasting much too long. What shall I say if they ask about it? That we didn't have anything to talk about? Or that she fell asleep like a baby? Doesn't make any difference; they wouldn't believe me anyway. The judge shrugged. Let them think what they like.

It didn't matter so much that Karolinszky had beaten him at women, fame, success and living well; he always had enough of those things. What bothered him was that the professor was far ahead of him even in revulsion, disdain, stubborn hatred and that apartness which constitutes the only weapon a man could use against the world's baseness, defending himself without hope but with dignity, and the more hopeless the situation the more dignity. The judge felt the blood drain from his face. He knew very well that he had been and would be a slave all his life. He was everybody's foot stool and, what was more painful, everybody's henchman. Thus he had cheated not only the powers which controlled his existence and his thoughts but also a world which was bigger and more real than himself. The world of an unknown being hiding behind quick forgetfulness: the being he had once wanted to become.

The judge groped for his pipe, but he did not try to light it. Then he started to pick the accumulated remnants of tobacco from under his nails. His fingers were trembling because he felt his time to revolt had come. Against the professor, against the slavery, against the spider web which kept his body and soul captive, against Agnes and against himself too. It would be his last chance. Good God, how easy it could be. The pipe fell out of his hand and he didn't bend to pick it up. He knew now that he would only have to hate or to love, with terrible force, relentlessly and self-forgotten. To hate or to love. It's all the same; the content of the emotion was quite unimportant—only the completeness of it mattered, the intensity. It was suddenly clear that the only possibility of escape from the world of

artificially magnified hatred and compulsive love was a storm of compassion or a bitter, puking rage—a true passion which could wash him clean by sheer force and make him able for the first time in his life to do something decent. . . . He leaned with both of his hands on the grimy outside windowsill and exposed his face to the light breeze coming from the Danube. He was exploring his own feelings. But he didn't feel a thing. What a pity, he thought then and shrugged his shoulders, what a pity! Or is it better that way? Well, old man, you have won again.

'Will they hang him?' Rezi asked in an almost playful way, her head tilted to one side. She was quite beautiful; her face was rosy, her blue eyes shone and her brown hair fell disordered on her white forehead.

The judge started to bend down for his pipe, but stiffened. She must be crazy or else she thinks I am an idiot.

'Would you like a glass of water, my dear?' he asked softly and reached for the carafe on his desk. 'The best thing now would be for you to get into a cab and go home, because . . . ' He did not care whether she stayed or went home; it was only his official situation that required that he get rid of this unwanted but very pretty visitor.

'Will they hang him?' Rezi asked again and took a step toward the window.

'In this country,' declared the judge loudly, 'Nobody has ever been punished if he didn't deserve it, my dear Rezi, because in this country the power and consequently the administration of justice is in the hands of the most progressive class in history.' Suddenly he reached out and caught Rezi's thin wrist. The skin was searingly cold. The judge shivered. 'Come closer.' Rezi obeyed, but very slowly. 'What I am about to tell you, I'm not telling you,' the judge said. 'So you mustn't pay attention to it, understand?' Rezi did not reply. She was now standing quite close to him and he still held both her wrists. Her little round breasts touched his arm. If she protests, I'll throw her out, and if she doesn't . . . Rezi did not protest. Distant flames burned in her blue eyes. Suddenly he released her and started to pace the room with small, nervous steps. 'You must realize, my dear, that in the age in which we live, I dare say in which we are fortunate enough to live, for we are given the opportunity to witness and partake in a revolution about which people could only dream in the past, you must accept reality, no matter how difficult that may be. You must have no illusions. Anybody arrested by our State Security

forces, regardless of who it may be, is guilty and, being guilty, my dear, must suffer punishment. I do not know'—the judge hesitated for a moment, wondering whether he should utter the name or not, and decided that it would be better not to—'what your brother did, but I have no doubt that nobody can avoid getting what he deserves.' Quite good, he thought, though a bit flat. I should say something about the law in reactionary times because I know about that too. 'What is the difference, my dear girl, between the class court of the bourgeoisie and the proletarian court? The so-called equality before the law of the bourgeoisie was nothing but a camouflage for relentless and cruel oppression while the judicial system of the proletariat ...'

He stopped pacing and faced Rezi for a moment. 'The proletariat,' he went on in an outburst of anger, 'doesn't recognize such impartiality. We threw that humbug on the rubbish heap of history, irrevocably, and for the first time in the history of mankind constructed a legal machine of the working classes, the intellectuals and the peasants, which offers true impartiality. You find this a contradiction? Yes, there is a contradiction, but a contradiction inherent in life itself. We recognized it, brought it to the surface and changed its character. That's why we can talk openly about our partiality. We don't conceal which side we are on and we don't babble about objectivity because we know that it doesn't exist except in the mind of the bourgeoisie. We admit our prejudice, dear girl, but we are prejudiced in the interests of the people. Therefore whoever commits a crime against the people is destined to ...' I'm overdoing it, thought the judge. The Confessions of St. Augustine. I must get the girl out of here as soon as possible. But how? I should take her out through the old man's office; that would give me an opportunity to explain the whole thing in a natural way. ... I hope he's in today.

'Will they hang him?' Rezi asked and leaned against the wall with her eyes closed.

'Yes,' said the judge, softly but impatiently. 'You have to go now, Rezi dear.' He took the girl's arm as if she had been ill. 'This way, please.' He led her towards a small door at the far end of the room.

'I'm afraid,' said Rezi. 'There's no more lemon.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The office news bulletin was displayed on the wall opposite the entrance under a large, dusty election poster whose once vivid colors had long faded. The dark-blue overall of the Worker looked black, the white coat of the Intellectual was a dull, dirty patch, the chubby face of the Tractor Girl had paled. The glittering light of the rising sun had dimmed, the green grass of the meadow was now yellow, the dry leaves of the tall poplars rustled dryly. They were doomed to stay there, however, for no instructions had been given for the poster's removal and no one had the nerve to take it down.

It was about half past twelve when Freddy Nagy finished his lunch. There was no official lunch time fixed for employees of the Canning Authority; they could take about half an hour at any point between 12 and 2 P.M. to eat. The fact that Nagy had got through his meal earlier and quicker than usual did not create any stir; he must be hungry, they thought. Seeing him eat made them suddenly hungry and they began to fish little paper bags out of their briefcases.

But Freddy Nagy was not at all hungry, not since his cautious conversation with the superintendent of the apartment house where Rezi Karolinszky lived. The feeling of suspension which had remained with him was swelling into an evil foreboding, for the fear displayed by Alajos Sandor had multiplied his own sense of helplessness. He realized that he had done everything in his power to prevent the unavoidable by setting Alajos Sandor against Mrs. Mikecz and Vili Racz. Still, he wasn't convinced that his efforts would be successful, partly because Mrs. Mikecz had vanished early in the morning (according to Lil Feher she had gone to see the doctor; according to Aliz Weszelka it was the Party committee, and he considered the latter information to be the more reliable) and partly because, unlike his colleagues, he had a profound dislike for Vili Racz. Furthermore, he couldn't believe that Sandor's sudden zeal would persist. He therefore decided to leave for the day: he would make his exit quietly, leave fate to take its own course, and tomorrow . . . well, tomorrow they would all see what happened. It was not cowardice that motivated his decision. It was a simple act of selfishness, of expediency, prompted by an instinct which clearly indicated to him the things he should undertake and those he should not; also, how much of others' burdens he should shoulder and what reserves

he would need to carry his own.

He was due at the storehouse to arrange for a consignment of green peas going to the German Democratic Republic. He was looking forward to the long streetcar ride; he liked to doze off in the corner of a half-empty car, swaying gently on the jolting rails, far from the scrutinizing glances of Mrs. Mikecz, the engaging smiles of Vili Racz, the pitiful depravity of Aliz Weszelka, the perpetual anxiety of Gortvai—alone in the friendly suburbs of the aging city, grayish yet heart-warming. According to the office rules, he should have announced that he was going out, where he was going and when he planned to return. But he just didn't feel like it. They'll tell me quick enough if they disapprove. If they ask me, I'll reply; if they don't, I'll keep my mouth shut. It takes about three quarters of an hour to get to Nagytelep, and for that three quarters of an hour I am lost to them. They can't register me, enter me in their books, check and double-check on me. I will go where I want to, do what I want to. To hell with them. It's my revenge. He moved stealthily down the narrow, dim corridor. In the entrance hall he stopped suddenly. A midday glare filled the little place, and the office news bulletin swayed provocatively on the wall. Even the rickety office desk looked cheerful to him.

From under the desk came the sound of faint moaning. He bent down to look and found the wrinkled old face of Mamma Sam, who cleaned the offices and carried messages. It was a ridiculous name, but that was what everybody called her; she had taken over the name from her husband, Samuel Tokar, after he had died.

'What in heaven's name are you doing down there, Mama Sam?' he asked. Suddenly he had to smile. He had known Mama Sam in those miserable days when land speculation was still permitted; her husband was a mason who worked for a construction firm which had close relations with his own office. He had met the old woman again a few months ago on the street; she looked ragged, thin and starved. Sam had fallen off a scaffolding and been killed. Shortly after that meeting, Mama Sam started work at the Canning Authority, and this little bit of success made Nagy feel very happy. He had overcome Mrs. Mikecz's resistance without calling on Vili Racz's help, and Mama Sam was soon loved by everyone in the office.

'Would you have a thumbtack handy, Mr. Frederick?' she asked, still on all fours under the desk. 'Comrade Mikecz gave

me a poster to hang immediately and I lost the tack.'

'Let me see it,' said Nagy quickly.

'Over there,' said Mama Sam, pointing to the bench.

'What's it all about?' he asked, and his stomach turned over gently.

'I don't know, Mr. Frederick,' replied the old woman. 'I left my glasses at home. You read it.'

He stared at the letters, which were red, rather fancy, with an exclamation mark at the end. Now he had to postpone his revenge. But when did the bitch come back? He replaced the poster on the bench and turned around.

'Aren't you going out, Mr. Frederick?' Mama Sam asked.

'No,' came his reply. 'We're having one of our meetings at five o'clock tonight, Mama Sam. Participation is compulsory for everyone.'

The old woman kept looking at the floor. 'You couldn't be back in time, is that it, Mr. Frederick?'

'No, I couldn't. There's your thumbtack, under the bench.' Out of the corner of his eye Nagy saw his streetcar disappear around the bend.

Geza Libaldy, who was responsible for the bulletin board, knew nothing of what was going on. About three quarters of an hour earlier he had been summoned to Mrs. Mikecz's room, he told Freddy rather ruefully, where he was given instructions to put all other work aside and produce a notice.

'But why didn't you tell me that the bitch had returned?' Nagy asked him. There was no answer. Freddy stood in the middle of the room, shocked by the brutality of his own question. He did not like to hurt innocent people and he hadn't really expected an answer. When had she come back? It didn't matter. She was there, and they all knew it.

There was silence now in the offices. Everyone was busily at work, pushing with diligent concentration against the rapidly rising wave of nausea which threatened them. Freddy experienced a distant feeling of warmth mixed with his helpless fury; there was a harmony hidden behind the armor of silence. We will survive. Oh yes, we will survive this too, he assured himself with a sigh. That will be our real revenge. Real? I wonder. But that did not matter either.

The telephone on Geza Libaldy's desk rang. 'Yes?' he answered. Then his voice picked up: 'Oh, what can I do for you, Comrade Mikecz? ... Yes, she's here. ... Yes, I'll tell her.' He covered the receiver with the palm of his left hand and whispered, 'Edit, she wants you.'

Edit Simonovics got to her feet and dropped her pen clumsily on the table. 'Yes, Sari dear,' she said slowly, her knees pressed against the desk. Her fawnlike eyes stared vacantly over Freddy's head. 'No, I haven't had lunch yet, but I really don't mind, not at all. I'll be right over.'

She closed the door gently behind her. Freddy watched her go. Break-through, he thought. Panic at the Stock Exchange. The price of real property is crashing. At that moment he decided not to go to the meeting.

Alajos Sandor's right hand was bandaged, almost up to the elbow. He had been lucky; the glass of the window which he had smashed had only lacerated his fingers, and the splinters had stopped short of the artery. Three stitches, nothing worse,

For quite a while after having it treated, he had walked the dusty streets aimlessly. He did not feel like working but he didn't feel like going home either, although he could have—the accident was justification enough. He went into an espresso and drank a watery cup of coffee, then crossed over to a barbershop. For several days Anna had been making sarcastic remarks about the beauty of his long hair; he needed a haircut. But then he thought of what they would say in his office: Oh well, Comrade Sandor can have a haircut during office hours; he's in a workers' cadre. So he moved on, until he reached the Opera House. Then he turned back. The friendly, familiar clatter of the midday traffic had a soothing effect on his uneasiness. Probably there won't be any trouble after all. It's only been four days since Karolinszky's arrest, four days since Rezi last came to work: who knows, she might turn up tomorrow.

He stood at the curb, motionless in the glaring sunshine. All of a sudden he noticed water gushing out from beneath the pavement on the far side of the street: timid bubbles first, then a sizzling, splashing, giant column, a glittering, foaming, lacy torrent with fringes in hues of silver-blue, green and lilac. Reaching several stories high, it opened like a fan against the vertical rays of sun: a shimmering, fairylike umbrella.

Sandor crossed the street toward the hydrant, holding his face toward the water, an inner peace settling in his heart at the sight of this unexpected beauty. A pleasant numbness came over him.

'Lovely, isn't it?' a deep, young voice sounded beside him. There stood a man in blue linen trousers, shirt sleeves rolled up, hair cut short, humorously disproportionate features, flat

head swaying cheerfully on a thickset, suntanned neck. Sandor threw a curious glance at the man, who, not unlike a painter scrutinizing his canvas, stood squinting at the bubbling water.

'Beautiful,' Sandor remarked, smiling. 'The colors.'

With an air of superiority, the bull-necked young man waved a hand. 'You're telling me, buddy. Why do you think I took up sewers? For the pay? Could have worked on the subway. But they sent for me. I can stand the trains a damn sight better than any of those big-mouthed peasants, I can. And they make a pile there, they do, but you live like a worm.' And he gave a shiver which, to Sandor's surprise, revealed an incomprehensible sadness shining from the man's jet-black eyes. 'What would you do if you won the pools—say, a hundred thousand?' the man asked.

'I don't know, I never thought of it,' replied Sandor. Dreaming was Anna's department. Every evening after she fed Dani and put him to bed and served their own supper, she would practically collapse into the rickety armchair beside the tile stove, her eyes closed and a distant mirth settling on her charming, bony little face, her snub nose and long eyelashes. These were the moments, Sandor knew, when she must not be disturbed. There was no waiting in line for potatoes, on darning of socks with never-ending holes, no bitter worrying over every penny at the end of the month: all trouble ceased in this world where she had flown at the end of the day. This was Anna's half hour of happiness, her sham reward and cowardly refuge; he knew it all right, yet the pity, the love he felt for her on these occasions were stronger than his own fury and made him understand that on no account must he do anything except keep absolutely still.

'I,' continued the young man with the bull-neck, 'I would just sit on the riverbank doing nothing at all, nothing at all, buddy. What about you? Don't you like to sit on a riverbank?'

'I do,' replied Sandor.

'We might even get to the sea sometime, who knows?' continued bull-neck, gazing at the rushing brilliance. 'What do you say?'

'It's possible, isn't it?' said Sandor. A giant wave was sweeping toward him with white horses on its back, and he inhaled the sharp, salty smell carried by the breeze.

The question 'Have you ever been to the sea?' sounded very near.

'No, I have never been there,' he replied in a low voice, 'but maybe I would go if I won the pools.'

'Francis,' came the command from the other side of the torrent, 'turn it off!' The sizzling stopped. The lights disintegrated. The arch of the rainbow split in two, and like a wounded bird the water subsided, its wings still flapping, exhausted. Near the curb a grayish streak of water made for the sewer close by. Sandor suddenly felt a strange desire to make little boats out of the paper under his arm and let them float down the current. Don't do it, cracked Gortvai's voice; it's not in your interest.

He shuddered as if the cold blast lurking under the heat of the mid-day sun had suddenly touched him. In this society of ours, no one has any interest of his own and that's what is so horrible because it means that everyone, absolutely everyone, pursues his own interest. Not because they believe that idiotic blabber about the identity of individual and common interest but because the healthy and to some extent moral clash of various individual interests has been replaced by hypocrisy under the banner of community interest. Slowly he made his way back down Jozsef Attila Street.

'And what is it you want to know, Uncle Freddy?' he asked the old man whose chubby face was suddenly flushed with heat although his clever greenish-brown eyes still looked fierce and impatient.

'The future, my boy,' said Nagy, 'the future. Five o'clock, six o'clock, ten o'clock, the whole business. And you, why did you break the window?'

Alajos rested his wounded arm carefully on the desk. 'What makes you think I broke the window?' He was quite calm now, the pleasant, natural curves of his face restored. His left ear was still burning, though; somebody is talking about you, Anna would say, and Sandor could not help smiling. Anna's superstitions made you feel helpless.

'Did you or didn't you?' Nagy asked, an edge of irritation in his tone.

'I did,' Sandor confessed reluctantly. He failed to understand Nagy's irritation.

'Why?' asked the old gentleman as drops of glistening sweat settled on his mustache.

'Don't you know why?' Sandor asked in a small voice.

'Of course I do,' said Nagy. 'You wanted to go home.'

'Cut that out,' the young man said, fiddling with his loosened bandage.

'Then you must have lost your nerve,' the old man went on.

Sandor did not reply; he just stared blankly ahead. 'Why, of course, you lost your nerve. You glorious partisan! Champion of the people! So why didn't you go home? Why not?'

His eyes on the floor, the engineer's reply was hardly audible: 'Because I'm too afraid to be a real coward, sir.'

The greenish-brown eyes lit up. 'I envy your courage, my boy,' he said, smiling. 'I shall forget about you with great affection, though I would have liked to remember you.'

'Too bad,' said the engineer sullenly. 'Gortvai isn't back yet, is he?'

'Not likely, is it?' said the old man. He dropped his voice. A vigorous jerk ran across his face and he jumped up, his right hand digging deep into his thick brown hair. Alajos Sandor turned quickly.

There in the doorway, pale as a sheet of paper, her narrow, freckled face buried in a handkerchief, stood Edit Simonovics, sobbing convulsively.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The Secretary of the District Party Committee had kept Mrs. Mikecz waiting a good twenty-five minutes. He had offered no excuse; he had merely had his secretary tell her to sit and wait her turn. When she was finally admitted to his presence, he omitted the usual amenities and immediately launched into a blistering attack.

'It is incredible,' he hissed, 'incredible that despite a year and a half of instruction you are still incapable of understanding the meaning of working with people. Sit down!' He kicked a chair in front of the desk. Frightened, Mrs. Mikecz sat. She had never seen the man look and act like this. His face was white; thick drops of perspiration mingled with the unkempt hair falling down over his furrowed brow. And through the black eye patch that covered his left eye socket a huge, glowing ball seemed to be focused on her, mysterious and pitiless. Mrs. Mikecz was always prepared for anything, but she had never even dreamed of such a reception. She sat there on the low chair, her hands helpless in her lap.

'Always ahead ... running far ahead! In a hurry, eh?' he went on, a little louder but even more hoarse with anger. He

squashed the butt of his cigarette, which had burned close to the tips of his fingers, and immediately fumbled in his pocket for another. 'Has it ever occurred to you that you must convince people of the truth, that it is not sufficient to issue the command, raise the banner and cry, Forward march, follow me! How many times has the Party condemned these methods—how many times! I won't say this is not the easier way—I am the Party Secretary, I issue my instructions, and heaven help those who don't obey. But to explain what it is all about, what has to be done and why, is much more difficult, isn't it?' He paused, somewhat calmed by a new cigarette he had lighted. 'And what if you had asked for our opinion, would that have been beneath your dignity? I wonder what your brother would say to your procedure—I wonder.'

Mrs. Mikecz sat up straight. Her brother, the General, could make no comment; he had been ordered to a military academy in the Soviet Union four months ago. And she remembered that a few days after he had been made a general he had remarked that there was another man who had hoped for the same post and that the other man was none other than her boss, the almighty District Party Committee Secretary. It was only by a hairsbreadth that he, Istvan Bitto, had been given the assignment and the rank that went with it, instead of that man. There was no doubt in her mind that the Party Secretary was hitting at her now in revenge on her brother and because he knew that there was no one she could turn to. Her brother would not be home even on leave for at least a year. And to write him a letter about such a matter would be the height of stupidity; such matters should not be put into writing. What could she do? Fear drove the blood to her cheeks; her head drooped again.

'So you have nothing to say. You admit that you were wrong!' The District Party Secretary kept looking at her, but she felt incapable of lifting her head, of uttering a single word, of even returning his stare.

'It is not enough to lead the masses,' she now heard him proclaim. 'You must listen to the voice of the masses, Comrade, you must consider their maturity, state the development, their desires. Have you forgotten what you were taught at the Party school? I warn you that your attitude recently has worried us a great deal. Are you trying to go some way of your own? Well, in the Party there are no separate ways; there never have been and there never will be, and if you think you are an exception to the rule, then ...'

Outside, on the street in front of the four-story gray building of the District Party Headquarters, Mrs. Mikecz stood in the sweltering heat. Her throat constricted with fear, anger and hatred. She had been betrayed—that was certain. The Secretary had known everything: the purpose of her visit, the plan of the meeting, everything in detail. He knew that she had called the meeting without consulting the workers, perhaps even against the will of the workers. And this was the inexcusable error, the unforgivable sin!

But who could have been the informer? Only one other person knew her plan; she had told only that one person her timetable for the afternoon. Violating her own nature and habits, she had told that person what was in preparation; she had honored him with her comradely confidence and solicited his advice. Vili Racz had nodded and wiped his eyeglasses with a small chamois over and over again. 'We are in complete agreement, Comrade Mikecz! Complete,' she could hear him say.

In the first surge of violent hatred she decided that as soon as she was back in her office she would summon Vili Racz and confront him with the vileness of his betrayal. But as she moved through the narrow, airless streets of the Inner City, her fury and hatred became refined into shrewd, deliberate thought. She would not say a word to him. On the contrary she would be nicer than ever, friendly, considerate, and to a degree even more attached. Let the bastard believe that his stratagem was successful; let him believe that he out-smarted that simple, uneducated working girl, and then his day will come. He'll see what I'm like when I really go to work on somebody. She giggled with nervous satisfaction.

Before she opened the big, shiny brown door leading to the main offices of the Canning Authority, she waited listening for a while in the drafty, echoing landing. The worn stone stairs suddenly stopped here on the fourth floor; there was nowhere higher to go. At the end of a short corridor to the left, a heavy iron door leading to the attic creaked on its hinges; whenever enough of an air current had accumulated through the loose roof tiles, it would open a bit and then slam closed again with a loud clap.

Nothing stirred outside the office entrance. Mrs. Mikecz pushed one wing of the brown door open and peeked in cautiously. As she had expected, the waiting area was deserted. Mama Sam was not there—around this time she was always out getting lunch for those who had not brought their own

from home. She crossed stealthily toward the corridor leading to her own office, noting that the door to the bookkeeping department was half open. She stopped short, but then her instinctive curiosity made her tiptoe to where she could cast an eye over the whole department. But she discovered nothing suspicious; they were all bent over their papers. The floor creaked under her feet, but no matter; she was past being seen. Nor did she meet anyone on the balance of the walk to her own door.

Locking herself into her office as noiselessly as possible, she sighed deeply and sank into her comfortable armchair, completely played out. Through the window came the sound of a distant violin. Its melody enveloped her, choked her with its blithe, saccharine innocence. She sat rigid, her legs crossed and her body bathed in perspiration. Then the music of the violin ceased abruptly, and in its place came the familiar noises of the street—the clop-clop of horses, the creaking of brakes, the hoarse, obscene cries of textile workers moving huge bales in front of the next building. She covered her ears with the palms of her hands; the noise diminished. But inside her, the humiliating truth which the District Party Secretary had thrown in her face kept going round in her brain, clanging and booming with monotonous repetition. For she knew that he was right, fundamentally and unmistakably right. And she knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that the error was entirely her own fault, the result of that indecision so characteristic of the petty-bourgeoisie—or was it her proletarian pride? Maybe the teachings of Lenin, the prerequisites of Communist leadership, had not yet become her flesh and blood. For full results one must have the support of the workers on all occasions—in any situation—perhaps because . . . She was shivering again. Behind the menacing blows that accompanied the District Secretary's words there vibrated an unutterable suspicion which, because of its very nature, appeared more powerful, more pregnant, more accusing. By identifying a frequent strategical error as a weakness of character, the error became a hideous crime. In short: the District Secretary doubted her sincerity. But wasn't she truthful to the Party? What was it she had kept from them? He had seemed to indicate that the time for making a confession, the moment when she could have admitted her guilt meekly and penitently, was over and gone. Her admission would no longer interest anybody. She knew, too, that he did not want to hear a confession but simply to see her Communist honesty, her decency, her courage. She made a

desperate effort now to detect what the man had been hinting at. What could it be that she was holding back from that reliable old warrior, the proud possessor and depository of the Party's trust? What was it?

With a clumsy gesture she reached for her light-brown ox-hide attaché case that was lying against the desk. Her hands were shaking. There was the enemy, right before her nose! It was vigilance—Communist vigilance. That was the trouble; she was now quite sure. The enemy had been rummaging among her confidential papers, infecting Lautenburg and all the disgusting, slimy petty bourgeois who were naturally only too eager to . . . And she, she not only had failed to notice it all, but she had tolerated it. She even offered Party membership to Rezi Karolinszky, good God!

The very idea made her sick. Looking at herself in the mirror, she saw her own reflection—a tired, worn, tormented face, yellow scars under dark-brown smudges—and she started powdering herself with rapid movements, but her parched, dry skin could no longer hold the scented grains, which scattered all over her desk. Of course, that is what he had wanted to hear. She ought to have told him about it with sincerity, deep and honest self-criticism. No wonder he fell into a rage. The miracle of it all was that she had gotten off so lightly. There was no time to lose. The error must be corrected with the utmost speed before the vast invisible machinery was set into motion somewhere in the gray labyrinth of the District Party Committee or in the cold, majestic building of Central Party Headquarters.

It must be today, she thought, definitely today, this afternoon at the meeting. She would make it the framework of her appeal and within it build the rest of what she had to say. She would reveal her own shortcomings, expose the ideological basis of her unforgivable laxness. She would tell them about vigilance in relation to class, about the acute necessity of being on the alert for the enemy every single minute, never slacking, never sparing any effort, nor having any pity; in class warfare there was no such thing as a vacuum—your loss is the enemy's gain.

The powder was sticking to the damp palm of her hand. She lifted up the piece of paper lying in front of her and was on the point of shaking off the tiny grains of powder when she realized what she was holding. The blood rushed to her head in her shame and blind indignation. On the neatly typed page the workers of the company expressed their deep resentment and

informed the Party committee of their reaction to the Karolinszky affair. 'We must openly and emphatically declare that the problem in hand should be discussed collectively,' it said. She realized that the style was that of Vili Racz. 'Furthermore,' she went on reading, 'the chief culprit, Rezi Karolinszky, as well as the others taking part in the crime, should be punished severely and fully. We can no longer permit the agents of the enemy to contaminate our company, obstructing the glorious and, at the same time, hard and responsible work of building Socialism. We therefore appeal to the leaders of the Party and the T.U. that the strongest measures should be taken in order to ...'

Under the last words was a long row of signatures. There they were: Mrs. Horvai, Edit Simonovics, Frederick Nagy, Vili Racz, Istvan Lautenburg, Aliz Weszelka; she saw them all, but not Gortvai's—of course not; hadn't he been summoned by Comrade Holcz?—yes, of course, he could not be back yet. There was one other signature she could not find: Alajos Sandor. She jotted his name down in her little notebook with a thick question mark against it; some other time when she was less busy, she would look into this.

She got up and started pacing up and down. Here it was, the initiative coming from below. It was her task to make good if that was still possible. The meeting must be organized. The poster was a matter of five minutes, Geza Libaldy would see to that. There was the problem of speakers; not too many; the first one to open the meeting and set the tone of the discussion (she herself did not wish to speak until after the third or the fourth speaker, so as to summarize the speeches and evaluate their contents before giving her closing words). She wondered who the Party would delegate; the District Secretary had promised to send someone of weight and responsibility who would see that the meeting went off in a proper manner. Her own contribution in the debate must be to the point—deep and above all honest; it should be brought to the attention of everyone in the district and perhaps beyond it, too, in the higher circles. Well, now, for the person to open it . . . She stopped at her desk, her eyes roving through the signatures once again. They focused on one name, the name of Edit Simovics.

CHAPTER THIRTY

'So she ordered you to make a speech,' Alajos Sandor said to Edit Simonovics, who had stopped crying suddenly with a nervous hiccup.

'Yes,' Edit whispered and gave way to another hiccup. Up near the ceiling Rezi's face was glaring down at her. When had she really seen her last? She could not remember. When would she see her again? For a fleeting moment, she was filled with compassion; it touched her like a bird's light wings, but the touch reminded her of the black feathers of a vulture rather than of a sparrow's fluff.

'I don't know what happened to me,' she said suddenly. 'Don't be mad at me. I suddenly felt my heart in my throat and I just had to cry.' Her tears started again and her stomach filled with the nasty acid of fear and excitement.

'Be quiet, Edit, control yourself,' she heard the voice of the young engineer.

'Surprise! Surprise!' Uncle Freddy remarked. 'Why did you think she sent for Edit? To offer her candy, like Dr. Racz, your friend and comrade?'

Sandor shrugged and bent over Edit. 'Did she order you to speak up?' he asked.

'Not at all,' Freddy interjected. 'All she did was request, advise, encourage or whatever. Why would she have issued an order, Alajos? A Party Secretary? She merely used every means at her disposal to be convincing, if you know what I mean, old boy.' From his pocket he took out the small brush which he used to smooth his mustache, and went over his hair with it. 'You two will go down in the longboat.'

'I'm fed up with you,' Sandor said between his teeth. 'Uncle Freddy, why do you always have to be a know-it-all?'

'Have to?' asked the old man and he smiled wryly. 'I don't have to. But what can I do, since I do know? I'm sorry that you don't. You want to know more? She was very nice to Edit. Terribly nice. Am I right, dear?'

'Yes,' she admitted. 'She was very kind, Uncle Freddy, so kind that...' Edit stopped suddenly and started to tremble again behind her handkerchief.

'You hear that?' Nagy said, smiling broadly.

'No,' said Sandor, very red in the face. 'I'm deaf and dumb.'

'What a shame,' said Nagy. 'I always thought that our Party

blessed its members with sharp ears. At least my experience . . .'

Now Edit felt very sleepy and closed her eyes. Mrs. Mikecz had really been very nice. She had come out from behind the desk to welcome her, offered her a cigarette and lighted it for her. 'Edit dear, you can't imagine how ashamed I am that we haven't talked for such a long time. But all the work . . . How are the children? I haven't seen them for ages.' While she was babbling away, the whine of a violin rose from beyond the window, and Edit thought that Mrs. Mikecz's face became distorted by some nervous and strange convulsion. Anyhow, she became composed again, drew her skirt over her knees and bent toward Edit. 'The thing is, my dear, we have to have a spontaneous meeting this afternoon. Don't be nervous, it won't take very long—oh, about half an hour. You'll get home to the children at the usual time. For we can't do anything else about this unpleasant affair; we're in it up to our necks. That Rezi Karolinszky—she was so shy. Of course, I was always suspicious of her modesty, not to speak of her brother. Anyway, it should serve as a warning for us to be even more vigilant. The enemies of our system will utilize every opportunity to worm themselves in through the tiniest crack, to gain our confidence. So we must exercise self-criticism sometimes. I should think it would be desirable for you to make a few remarks this afternoon. Of course, only if you feel that way about it and about the whole affair. You did sign the petition, didn't you?' Mrs. Mikecz touched the paper on her desk. 'After all, the two of you were very close—everybody knows that. You even planned to spend your holiday together, Dr. Racz told me. This is another reason it would be important for you to speak up and condemn her before the workers; it would have great weight because you used to be her friend. And you might indulge in a bit of self-criticism at the same time; after all, you were misled by her, so you haven't been vigilant enough. And of course if you tell people about her ways how she wormed herself into your trust, then your speech will have a definitely positive character and at the same time . . .'

'Do I have to speak up this afternoon, Alajos?' Edit asked now.

Alajos' reply was an angry kick at the wastepaper basket, which turned over and spilled its contents before his feet. On the floor lay his speech for the next day's regular membership meeting. He still remembered the compulsion which made him read it to Gortvai. And where in hell is Gortvai? Why isn't he back yet? Well, no matter, he thought and somehow he wasn't

worried. He felt that somebody else had written that rubbish lying all crumpled up as a practical joke. 'Do you intend to stop howling with the pack at this point?' Nagy had asked, and his mustache gleamed. 'It's not the time.'

'Look here, Edit,' Sandor said very loudly, 'get your coat, lock your desk and go home! Or, if you prefer, take a nice walk, do a bit of window shopping, or go to Buda, sit in a nice little pastry shop. Tell them that you don't feel so well; you had a phone call that your father fell and sprained his ankle and can't move. Or that the children are lost and can't find their way home. The important thing is that you leave the office. Understand?' Alajos puffed with relief and wiped his forehead.

'I understand,' Edit said, but she didn't budge.

'You're wrong,' said Freddy Nagy and stood up. 'She stays!'

'Get going,' Sandor said to Edit, who still sat motionless on her chair, dabbing at her eyes. 'I said get out, didn't you hear me? Don't be afraid. Nothing will happen to you. I'll take the blame. Now, for God's sake, get out!' His gray eyes flamed with anger, which died down immediately. He crossed the room and gently touched her arm.

Nagy blocked the door and looked at them, his head slightly tilted. His tie pin was askew and he straightened it. 'Is this room always so stuffy, Alajos?' he asked, then added softly, 'I'm sorry. It isn't that easy. Don't be angry with me. But she stays.'

Sandor raised his head angrily and returned to his desk. 'So ... and she speaks her little piece, too?' He was trying to talk quietly and coherently.

'Yes,' replied the old man sadly. 'She will make a speech.'

'Beautiful! Wonderful! And may I ask why?'

'Do I need to explain to you, Alajos, of all people?' asked the old man. 'Because there is nothing else she *can* do.'

'What logic!' Sandor whistled scornfully. 'Brilliant! There is nothing else she can do! The miracle of Christian humility! If I didn't know you were an agnostic, Uncle Freddy, I would think that old age has led you back into the bosom of the Church. And what is she going to say, I ask you?' He stood straight and started to declaim. 'My dear comrades, I must tell you that I inadvertently helped the enemies of the Party, of the People, of our Socialist regime. The enemy's agent, in sheep's clothing, gained my confidence and exploited my lack of vigilance. Let it be said in my defence, however, that despite my being outside the Party I have dedicated my entire being to

the development of the People's Democracy. My error, Comrades, should serve as an example of how easily the enemy can sneak into our ranks.' He stopped. 'Edit! Get out of hear. Now, Unless you want to take this old man's advice.'

Edit burst into tears again, wailing and moaning in great waves. 'What am I to do, what, dear Alajos? I don't know, I really don't...'

'Get out of here. What are you waiting for? Applause?'

She got to her feet with an effort. She felt drained of all strength and her knees buckled.

'Sit down,' Nagy shouted. 'And you idiot, shut up! Do you realize that if she leaves here now she can never—understand, *never*—set foot in this place again? Are you trying to make this widow with two children lose her job?' His face was distorted with anger. 'Maybe you think you can protect Rezi by sending Edit away? You're even stupider than I thought. You're giving Mikecz a perfect opportunity to kill two birds at one time. Who in hell would believe any story from Edit this afternoon? And who would believe you? Rezi is finished, through. You can't save her, even at the price of your Party card, no, you can't save her, God have mercy on her. So what do you want?'

Sandor seized the lapels of Nagy's jacket. 'Decency!' he whispered and repeated it hoarsely: 'Decency.'

The old man pushed him away. Behind the pince-nez the veins in his eyeballs were showing. 'Bravo!' he said softly. 'A fine time to come to your senses, my friend. Why didn't you start a bit earlier? And even now, why not with yourself?'

'I won't argue about that now,' Sandor said quietly.

'Decency! Indeed,' the old man muttered. 'In whose name? The people's name? Humanity's name? Or in the name of our glorious Party? Or in the name of those two children who have to be raised, clothed and fed? Shit on your decency, especially if its price is the worst kind of indecency I have ever seen in my life.'

Sandor withdrew behind Gortvai's desk and bowed his head. 'I'm sorry you think I'm an idiot,' he said. 'I know that Rezi can't be saved. But do you want to see this girl stand up in front of all the employees who know it, too, and who also know about the friendship between the two girls? Do you want her to spit on herself, to deny her friend publicly and then to beg the forgiveness of those who staged the whole foul comedy? Do you want her to detest herself for the remainder of her life just because——'

'Yes,' said the old man, and suddenly compassion, like death, dissolved the hard lines of anger and disgust in his face. 'Yes, that is exactly what I want her to do. To speak up, spit and puke upon herself, deny her deepest feelings and ask them for forgiveness as fervently as she can. Let her be indecent, despicable and a traitor. Call her what you want, I couldn't care less. You Communists brought all this about, but if you don't like what you've done, don't try to make good by using a widow with two children. You go tell them that you don't agree with what they are doing, that you think it stinks and that in your opinion . . . Just what is your opinion anyhow? This morning I asked you to find out what that whore was up to. Did you do it? The hell you did. You broke a window, babbled with Racz, and then you took a walk. Meanwhile Mrs. Mikecz ran to the District Party Secretary and persuaded him to have the meeting and then she came back here and gave instructions for it while Dr. Racz passed a circular around stating that the workers here demand an investigation into the case of Rezi Karolinszky and want her to be punished.'

'Did you sign it?' Sandor interrupted, startled. It was the first he had heard of the circular.

'Who do you think I am?' the old man retorted and shrugged. 'A resistance hero? The champion of truth and decency? Of course I signed it; everybody signed it. And now Mrs. Mikecz is studying the signatures for every possible significance.' He took his handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped his forehead. 'Come, Edit,' he said softly. 'You still have two hours to get ready.'

Edit remained motionless in her chair. 'You don't even ask her whether she wants to speak or not!' Sandor exclaimed. He stared out the window.

'Democracy doesn't begin when people are asked questions,' Nagy said, 'but when people ask questions. In the dictatorship of the proletariat, however, you have to answer without being asked. Of course she'll speak. Come on, my dear. Hatred can't be paid for with small change; all these debts can only be settled by even more violent hatred. Alajos, pull yourself together or you will perish.'

Sandor still said nothing.

'Don't be angry,' said Edit, 'please don't. What could I say? The children loved her too. Little Mary was always pulling her ears. She didn't mind at all; she just laughed. I told her not to spoil the children, but she just laughed. What could I tell them? She came to visit so rarely. I didn't really know her. I

baked a raisin cake for her once. Raisins are very hard to get these days, but there's a grocer around the corner who has some raisins under the counter. What could I say? I'm empty, my head is empty, I can't think of a thing, I'm so ashamed. I'm not always so stupid, please believe me. I promised Sari I would speak. But my head is so empty. Please help me, Uncle Freddy. Tell me what to say.'

The old man stepped back into the room. 'Hear that, Alajos?' he asked. 'She doesn't know what to say. What an indecent woman. But it doesn't matter, Alajos; you'll write the speech for her. You're an expert at what should be said on such occasions. Write a nice little speech, my boy. Sit down and write it right now.' He turned to Edit. 'Don't worry, my dear. It will be an excellent speech. Even Comrade Mikecz will lick her fingers, all ten of them. That is if she has ten. You never can tell about these New Women.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

When Joseph Mikecz entered the huge hall, the air trembled with the heat given off by the Martin ovens. Old Man Hartmann was just taking a sample of molten iron for a test. He deftly pushed his long-stemmed ladle into the white glow, holding his protective mask with his left hand before his face, then stepped back quickly and poured the bubbling metal into a crucible. The apprentice picked up the crucible to take it to the lab. The old foundryman rubbed his back and straightened up. Behind him the door of the hearth slid back in place, the hissing flames retreated. He put his protective mask on the dirty gate-leg table by the wall, then he drew a line on the blackboard over the bench with a piece of chalk. Only then was he able to sit down, wipe his sweating brow with his sleeve and light his pipe. He did not acknowledge the appearance of Mikecz.

It was half past three, Mikecz knew, the time of the first probe. Before that he did not have the slightest idea how late it really was. Nor did he remember too clearly what had filled the hours since he had left that desperate, screaming woman tossing on her bed, while his own rage had propelled him out the door, down the stairs, along the street, across the whole

city. Somewhere down in the semidarkness of the lost hours there was a sleepy pair of eyes, a transparent pink nightgown, a dirty glass with traces of lipstick.

'Where is Boldizsar, Uncle Karcsi?' he shouted at the top of his voice.

The old man chewed on his pipe. 'That shitass was hanging around here just a few minutes ago,' he answered without looking at Mikecz. 'He must have gone back to his hole.'

Boldizsar Postha, Party Secretary of the Martin furnace section, sat at his desk in his glass cage at the far end of the shop. He saw Mikecz walking toward him and wondered why. They had not been on speaking terms for the last four months and in the last few weeks they did not even greet each other. What the hell does he want? Postha thought; the stubborn ox couldn't be coming to make peace. Postha felt ashamed; he should have made the first move long ago, but every time he had stopped and faced Mikecz, his throat would block up. He was ashamed because of the workers and at the same time he felt pangs of conscience for that damn disciplinary procedure which hadn't been his idea at all. On the contrary, Postha had wanted to gloss the whole thing over, but Central Party Headquarters had insisted . . .

It had happened about four months ago, when the new norms were set. The man from the Central Party Bureau had started his speech on the increase in productivity expected under the new norms and how this would influence the standard of living. Mikecz had just got up and walked out of the hall, slamming the door behind him. He had to be disciplined, especially since everybody in the plant was upset and nervous about the new norms. And worst of all: they had laughed their heads off about Mikecz walking out.

Now Postha looked up to see Mikecz's face, threatening and strange. All the remembered angles, wrinkles and warts had vanished, as if somebody had poured acid over his head.

'Smoke?' he asked hoarsely and pushed the sooty tin box toward Mikecz. But the smelter did not touch the cigarettes. He remained silent. 'Go fuck yourself,' Postha growled. 'Why don't you talk? Have you lost your tongue? You're staring at me as if I had killed your mother.'

Mikecz just looked at him rigidly. The Party Secretary felt the point of a sharp needle running into his brain. He smoothed back his wiry black hair. His forehead was glowing. 'You're sick, old man,' he said softly. 'I've been watching you for weeks. You look as if you had been chewed up and spit

out. Why don't you go see a doctor?'

'I did,' Mikecz said.

'You see,' said Postha, a little bit taken aback. (It seemed to him that Micecz's voice had become thicker since the last time he spoke to him.) At the same time Postha felt relieved; he was glad that he had not slipped away to avoid this meeting. 'And what did the doctor say?'

'Nothing,' replied Mikecz. 'He wasn't in.'

'He wasn't in?' the Party Secretary repeated, and the anger which had cooled for a moment struck him again. 'You're an old fool and getting worse all the time. If he wasn't there, why didn't you go to his home?'

'I did,' said Mikecz dryly.

'What did the doctor say?'

'He was out of town,' Mikecz answered.

The Party Secretary wiped his forehead with his shirt sleeve. His throat was suddenly dry. 'Where?' asked Postha in a voice that was barely audible.

'Think hard,' said the foundryman.

'Go to hell,' growled the Party Secretary. 'Do you really think that I have nothing better to do than listen to your cracks? Tell me or don't tell me, it's up to you.' He saw himself with his mind's eye, leaning against the dusty table, a cigarette burning down almost to his fingers, old, stubbly, worn out, his face covered with the dirty shame of asking aimless questions. His eyelids became heavy and he struggled not to shut them tight. 'Where did he go?' he asked again.

'Think hard,' Mikecz repeated.

The Party Secretary again felt that cold tightness around his heart and now it permeated his guts while his skin was glowing with heat. He had last seen the doctor about five days ago when they rode home together after work, as they often did. The doctor had been mad as a hornet. He kept flailing his arms and then wiping his glasses as if they were fogged over. At the train station the noise of the home-going crowd enveloped them. Faces, both familiar and strange, appeared and vanished again. He strained to remember to evoke their features, but all that would come was the silvery glow of the dusk which had fallen. The lights went on; the train rolled to a stop. Shouting and crowding, then silence. How many people had seen them together? Ten? Twenty? A hundred? A thousand? Who could have noticed them? 'It can't be true,' he said at last.

Mikecz shrugged. 'Okay, so I'm a liar.'

'You're just spreading dirty rumors!' He was shouting at the

top of his voice and knew that there wasn't any point in it, but it felt good to hear his own voice break out.

'You're scared.'

'Of whom?' Postha roared. 'You don't know me, friend—I'm not afraid of anything.'

'I know you well,' said Mikecz. 'Why are you so red? You always used to turn pale when you got angry.'

'Get out of here,' said the Party Secretary. 'Get out before I throw you out.'

'Wait a minute,' said Mikecz. 'We haven't finished yet. You're scared, scared shitless, because you've slipped. Why were you fired from the Police? Why were you dismissed from the District Party Committee? What happened to you? I think you haven't been smart enough. You don't have to be real smart. Just a little smart. So why don't you check on my story?'

The Party Secretary leaned against the old filing cabinet. He was trembling and suddenly he felt as though there wasn't any air in the glass cage. 'When?' he croaked. The afternoon sunlight which was playing over the furnaces suddenly thinned out, belched smoke and caught fire.

'Three days ago,' said Mikecz and leaned close. 'Is this the fate of the New Man, Boldizsar?'

The other end of the hall was all aflame. 'What did you say?' Postha asked. What will those workers out there say when they find out? Nothing. They'll hem and haw, blink, shrug, and behind his back they'll wink at each other and grin. Maybe they already know. Everything was burning, flaming and crackling around him, like oil and fat. They always knew about everything before he had even an inkling.

Suddenly Mikecz shouted, 'I've had enough! Do you hear me? I'm fed up!'

'What are you fed up with?' Postha asked, coughing in the black smoke. But he knew the answer. He knew why he had been avoiding his friends for months (making excuses all the time and lying to himself that Mikecz was avoiding *him*); he knew why he couldn't utter a sound when their paths crossed. He knew perfectly well that he was shutting his eyes and plugging up his ears. He knew very well why there was a need for the flow of lies; he knew who needed them and why. He too lied to everything, himself first of all. 'What are you fed up with?' he shouted, choking.

Mikecz threw his red Party card on the dusty desk. 'This!' he thundered. 'Here, take it!'

Boldizsar Postha raised his fist to strike out. But his arm dropped as if it had been broken by some terrible force.

Poor Boldizsar, the smelter thought later with an odd, long-forgotten sort of compassion, poor Boldizar, what will become of you now? Who will encourage you when you get discouraged? Who will bawl you out when you make a mistake? Who will praise you when you do well?

He sat leaning against a pile of bricks in back of the Iron Works. A light veil of mist was draped across the scrawny trees, bushes, coal heaps, buildings; here and there lamps were lit, glistening dully. No one came this way; he was alone. He sat there for hours, going numb in the towering surge of memories which gathered him up and dropped him again, now submerging and now sweeping him ashore, whirling together and scattering again. He closed his eyes. Something, something was over now, he could tell. But what was over? And could there be a new beginning? He saw Postha's face turn white with fear and rage (finally he had grown pale again!); he saw the heavy hand poised to strike, and he did not recoil, did not defend himself. He was waiting, yearning perhaps, for this blow; he could almost feel the weight of the hurtling fist on his cheekbone, nose, skull. Why doesn't he strike? Why? He looked at him curiously, reproachfully. But Boldizsar Postha's gaze had again eluded his, brushed past his shoulder, out beyond the wall of the glass cage.

All of a sudden the flood of feeling abated and gave way to a grinding, sharp misery which overran him with its throbbing pain: who was the victor here and who the loser? He had flung down his Party card, had done what the others would have done if the whip of fear had not kept them in line—that and the instinct for survival. What would have happened if Postha had hit him? What would have happened if that wolf pack, that gray amorphous mass of men standing outside the glass cage, had sprung on Boldizsar Postha? Wouldn't he have rushed to Postha's defense? Wouldn't he have turned against them even though he knew they were right? He didn't doubt it for a moment, but this knowledge was not reassuring; on the contrary, it made him even more apprehensive. For were the would-be attackers right? Were they right in the sense in which he had conceived of justice long ago, when 'right' was still clear and unequivocal? They were not right—he knew that too. If Boldizsar Postha had only been defending himself with that fist, it would have been all right; self-defense con-

tains the possibilities of both defeat and victory, and he who strikes—regardless of whether he is right or wrong—must be ready to be hit back. But Boldizsar Postha was defending more than himself. He was defending his memories, aims, plans, his ideals: the paltry, charred, tattered belongings that could still be rescued from under the collapsing heap of rubble, a few rags of clothing, whatever meant to him a life more important than life, his sense of right. It was this right which had contorted itself in the raised fist, this right, aching and in controvertible as death. Mikecz knew that Postha had to defend himself against everyone and everything, precisely now, when he had finally understood that he was not right.

A chill wind rose and Mikeca pulled his coat tighter about him and stretched out his legs, which were beginning to go to sleep. At a distance red flames darted out from the Martin chimneys into the darkness above and dissipated in the sky. They won't reach the stars, he thought, shivering. The stars were beyond the reach of our fires, too, and yet what fires they were, what a conflagration! He grew a little dizzy and shut his eyes again. And were not those who stood out there, beyond the glass cage, tense, alert, poised to strike, were they not just as much in the right? Were they not always in the right, the oppressed, deceived, duped and deprived? Wasn't that too self-defense, that offensive, challenging, hate-filled watchfulness of theirs? They were in the right, all the same; they too were in the right—terrifyingly, pitilessly right—because right and justice are like that. But in that case, on whose side did he belong?

That question hadn't occurred to him for years; he was with the working class, the movement, the Party (which, at that time, was not yet sullied by the blood of the workers; on the contrary, every drop of blood spilled made it cleaner and more clearly irrefutable), as naturally and self-evidently as a man breathes. For the Party was not merely an ideal or a vocation; the Party was life itself and, even more than that, eternity. It made no difference if its ranks were decimated by cowardice, lack of faith, the enemy, the executioner; the Party could not be crushed. Even working in isolation, under persecution (or perhaps because of it), it drew its inexhaustible energy from the dialectic of history. It did not preach patience, understanding, submissiveness, love (because it knew that the time of love would come when the time of hate had run out); instead it sought out the causes of suffering, oppression and exploitation, brought them to light and, with crystal-clear logic, imparted

the plans, statistics, timetable of the future. Who, in *this* Party, needed to ask where he belonged?

He looked around. What had happened? What had happened to the future when it became reality? What of the Party on coming to power? What of the age of love? And what, what had become of himself, after so many years? A grinding, painful loneliness overcame him. It tortured him even more here among these grimy walls at the bottom of the chimney stacks spouting black smoke, in the wheeze and thunder of machines revolving on well-oiled ball-bearings—here, where he knew every path, every turning, every brick; for it was here that life used to begin. A cold blast of wind hit him again; he bent his head into his hands. And now it is to end here, right here? Could this be what he had felt before—death? It could be. Because until now living had always meant for him belonging to someone, and there was no other way of belonging to someone except in the Party, through the Party, by means of the Party. In the elaborate labyrinth of human relationships he could get his bearings only in this way (even if the Party had long since rejected him, as he had rejected it, long before he had flung that last token of his belonging on Postha's table—only thus could he establish what was good and what evil, who was a friend and who a foe; he himself existed only as a particle of the community. Now, however, in this calm, still evening, under the sky whose soundless, sparkling infinity suddenly reminded him of annihilation, without peace or dignity, now he felt, for the first time in his life, that he belonged nowhere, to no one. He had longed for deliverance from filth, deception, lies, himself; and now . . .

Uncertainty ran through his body, then suddenly streamed out of him, surrounded him, wrapped him in its slimy-soft texture; had he made a mistake? Perhaps he shouldn't have dared to do what he did? Or perhaps he should have tried just once more. And if it didn't work out, tried again and again, until he dropped dead. Perhaps he should have humbled himself, or maybe pretended, as so many of his old friends and comrades were doing; yes, perhaps he should have undermined the rottenness from within until it fell apart of itself, like a moldy, termite-riddled tree trunk. Maybe, maybe. But he had no more strength for this, no faith. He was too old, tired and discouraged; his hatred threw off only a few dying sparks, insufficient to ignite other people's disgust or despair, as it once could. It was no longer his business. That of the younger ones, perhaps? Or the stronger ones? Or the weaker?

Suddenly he got up and started out through the yellowish veil of dust cast by the sifting lights. Out, out of here, as fast as possible! This was a place to be born in, not a place to die. But did he really have to die? He walked faster, with an unexpected gush of excitement. Then he was standing in the door of the Iron Works, his heart beating anxiously. Inside, the fluorescent lights were on, their bluish violet radiance pouring in a susurrant spray over the metallic gleam of transmissions, the crackling belts, the ancient generators. A lanky young man with a tiny micrometer clutched in his right hand was tapping his foot. Was he right or not? It no longer mattered. All that had suddenly become of no interest. For was there a greater sin than the security of omniscience? And could there be a more compassionate verdict of not guilty than this weary, hesitant, tight-throated, in-humanly sad and yet so humanly right uncertainty which had been growing in him for weeks, months, years, spreading inside him, and now, all at once, come to fruition, finally and unequivocally? In a trice it had dissolved death's paroxysm and flooded the already stiffening body with the tingle of life's unknown possibilities.

He reached the gate. A squat, redheaded young man stepped out of the watchman's booth, gave a strict, salute, strictly asked for his identification, strictly examined it, and then strictly turned his back on him. He went through the gate and set out toward the express stop. In front of the church he came to a momentary halt, but he didn't turn—what for? He could feel that eternity had ended forever.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The meeting hall, which had been converted from a textile storage room only a few months ago, was long and narrow, more like a corridor, and dimly lit by a single, frosted-glass window. It was still almost empty at two minutes past five. Exactly one minute later the small door leading into it from the yellow-tiled courtyard was jammed with pushing, shoving humanity, and the temperature inside rose with incredible speed. The crush in the doorway was not motivated by eager impatience but self-interest: the first to arrive could get spots near the window or the ventilation shaft, which were both the

coolest places and the farthest from the platform, where eagle eyes could be watching. Of course, there were some who had no such concern about falling under the searching gaze of Mrs. Mikecz, and they were full of excited curiosity. Alajos Sandor stood just inside the narrow entrance, his jacket over his left arm. His other arm, bandaged, was like a blunt club supported by the raised knee of his right leg, which was resting on the rung of a chair.

A silence fell, in which the tension of waiting was intensified by the heat, the smell of textiles, of humanity, of damp walls and dust. The woman's noses shined and their armpits were moist. Everyone had passed over the crest of excitement about an hour and a half ago, and now the mood of nervous, frustrated waiting gave way to an almost delirious irritability. Suddenly seventy murderers were sitting in that hall, seventy executioners, kicking and clawing one another in their imaginations, under the pressure of the heat, and drunk from the danger. Then the attack was over; small talk could be heard from everywhere; some looked furtively at their watches. It was twelve minutes after five; everyone felt that the meeting had not started because Comrade Mikecz was waiting for somebody. Some listened for the noise of a car stopping at the gate. Nothing happened. Or, to be more accurate, the meeting was beyond happenings, because that which was to come would be only the sad and senseless rehashing of happenings which had already occurred in their minds. But only a few were aware of this, and they were not talking.

Sandor leaned against the cool wall; it felt good, like an extension of the strange calm which had absorbed him after he had drafted and typed the short speech for Edit Simonovics. Alone in his office, the mixture of disgust and anger had drained out of him and he realized that he was interested in the difficult task he faced. He had to dream up a speech that would do the least harm to Rezi and also rescue Edit from the morass, which would protect but also deliver a few blows to the enemy. The job was done, to his surprise, in half an hour.

Sandor found the text deft and clever. It began with an explanation of the concept of Communist vigilance, with proper references to the attempts of the enemy to block the building of Socialism, emphasized the *duty* of Communists and non-Party members to watch and expose such attempts, and casually alluded to the case of Rezi Karolinszky, adding that personal and friendly links should rather forward than impede the above-mentioned vigilance. In this instance, she, Edit Simonov-

vics, undoubtedly did commit a grave error, which obviously would never happen again, for the experience itself would be her guardian. At this point the quiet, dignified tone changed, giving place to an unmistakable tint of reproach. The speech reproached those who tried to convert the proper sense of vigilance into a senseless drive, the fruit of which was the opposite of that desired; those who detect the enemy in every gesture or word they happen to dislike, who are equally suspicious of the healthy and the sick, the hard workers and the loiterers, who destroy the self-confidence of the community, who thereby *help the enemy*, whose interest lies in causing disturbance (this was the twist which made him very proud of himself). He visualized Mrs. Mikecz sitting on the bench being accused of being an accomplice of the enemy. What fun! There was a last modest sentence about Edit Simonovics having her belief in the Party corroborated, the Party being right about declaring an all-out war on the *real* class enemy. Then he put the closely typed sheet in an envelope and took it to Edit's department. 'Edit,' he said quietly, because he knew that everybody was watching them closely, 'here's a complaint about something. Have a look at it if you can spare a little time.'

In the meeting hall now, Sandor put on his jacket, buttoned his shirt and fastened his tie in response to a silent rebuke from the other men; he was the only one in rolled-up sleeves (working class, so he can afford it, the glances said now as so often before). But he was not really concerned about their jealousy; he felt too much curiosity and excitement. What will they say about the speech? Because he did not doubt that the essence of Edit's speech would be understood. But will it have any effect? If only he would succeed in upsetting the balance just a tiny bit! It would ease up the intimidation which Mrs. Mikecz had surely planned; it would throw her off course. It would be nice if this sweating, tired crowd, filled with the presentiment of its own fall, could taste a remote possibility of revenge. Freddy Nagy would come to him, put his hand on his shoulder and wink. Will it succeed? He looked toward Edit, who sat in the second row, immediately behind Aliz Weszelka and next to Lautenburg, her head bowed. But she did not seem to notice his look. Lautenburg was twisting his neck, heavily, slowly.

When Mrs. Mikecz who had been waiting more than fifteen minutes at the building entrance, saw the one-eyed District Party Secretary step out of his dark-blue Pobieda, she paled

and became weak in the knees. This was too much of an honor. He had promised to send his deputy to the meeting; she never dreamed of his making a personal appearance, and realized that it gave nation-wide importance to what had started as a local rumble. She had expected him to send Ica Wolf, a pretty middle-aged woman who was her friend; she had arranged a proper reception for her in her office, with coffee and pastries from the nearby café (a rich creamy one among them because she knew that Ica liked these very much), and perhaps Ica would invite her to Sunday tea the next weekend and her brother, the Minister of Defense, might drop in too.

The District Party Secretary stood before the gates. The single brown eye was glowing with amicability. 'Everything okay?' he asked and held out his hand as Mrs. Mikecz approached.

'Yes,' she said in a low voice. 'You didn't tell me this morning that you could come yourself.'

'I didn't know,' the District Secretary answered. 'Look here, Comrade Mikecz, I was hasty and unjust this morning. I came personally to apologize and ask you to forget about it. On the other hand, I wanted to be present at your meeting. I hear that it was very well organized. And I really should look around your place. I've never had the opportunity.'

Mrs. Mikecz was overwhelmed. What an excellent man! They walked toward the courtyard and the yellow tiles sounded hollow under their feet. How does he know about the organization of the meeting? She felt the cloud of betrayal fall over her again and her unexpected joy fell into the shadows. Then she pulled herself together, put a benevolent smile on her face and entered the hall behind him.

Mrs. Mikecz faced the sweating, shapeless mass; for a while she could not see anything. Then her eyesight cleared and she looked them over, one by one. She knew, without a glance at the roll sheet, who was absent: Gortvai and Freddy Nagy. She would talk to Nagy about that in the morning, but now she had something more important to do. Straightening the collar of her blouse, she was aware of being watched for every movement: humbly, jealously, fearfully. This filled her with a sense of superiority, a loving responsibility. After all, they were human, erring creatures who needed guidance to save them from the enemy. The enemy! That was what they had come here for, to expose and crush the enemy. She had never before felt so clearly the surge of hatred. Before it had been theory;

now the cool idea was to be given hot, pulsating life. All she had to do was let herself go, yield to a sensation as in the old, forgotten days when she offered herself up to a different sensuality.

She was on her feet and speaking.

What she said was neither new, nor interesting, nor exciting. Quite the contrary, she made an effort to be simple, virtually indifferent, objective and brief. First she opened the meeting, then introduced the District Party Secretary, thanked him for coming in person to emphasize the particular significance the District Party Committee attached to the affairs of the Fruit and Canning Authority. Then she offered a few words about the background and purpose of the meeting (without mentioning Rezi). The audience began to move with her, and the terrible performance to come did not frighten and disgust them any longer. They felt with conscious joy that this time they were not victims but killers; they identified with Comrade Mikecz. She felt it but failed to understand the connections between those who were both persecuted and persecutors, who found their paths unerringly through the timeless jungle of human relationships, in the very minute when controversial interests should have been divisive. She raised her voice; it was the closing sentence, and her face was contorted by wide convulsions. For a moment it was lit up by a strange beauty; then it became rigid again, like a flow of lava cooling.

The District Party Secretary looked at her with interest. He was shrewd enough to know not only what was happening inside Comrade Mikecz but also to recognize in an instant the relationship which had developed between the woman and her audience. Very interesting, he thought while he lit his cigarette; I would never have imagined that this woman could do the trick. They sit there like rabbits held by the glare of headlights. She was not shouting and cursing as her kind usually does, he thought. What he found remarkable was not the degree of tension to which she screwed herself up, but her ability to maintain her influence over those who knew what she was. Very good indeed, thought the Secretary; they are afraid of her and, what is even more interesting, she is frightened of them. What a nice case of double slavery. It would be foolish to sever these ties. His idea about Comrade Mikecz changed quickly and he was very glad he had come.

He had made his decision after the second phone call from Vili Racz, which had left him with serious doubts about the usefulness of Comrade Mikecz. He patiently waited until Racz

finished his lecture on the faults committed by Comrade Mikecz in organizing the meeting, then he asked who would be the proper person to succeed Comrade Mikecz? When Racz made his proposals, the District Party Secretary knew what he wanted to know. He noted the two names Racz mentioned; now he knew who was *not* eligible. He was about to ignore the affair when he suddenly had an idea: why not go to the meeting himself? In the morning he had ticked off Comrade Mikecz in his first rage; now there was an excellent opportunity to exert some *tactical self-criticism*, as he called it. The purpose of it was to hide his suspicions and divert the attention of Comrade Mikecz from the purpose of his coming. Salvation, he thought, depends on whether I am inclined to forgive those against whom I committed the crime. He looked expectantly at Comrade Mikecz.

Whether it was the angle of vision provided by his single eye, or his craftiness and confidence in performing tricks with time past, present and future, he did not know, but it seemed to him that innumerable Comrades Mikecz were sitting next to him in the hall, that the hall was all mirrors. He felt full of laughter—bubbly, intoxicating laughter. What a rogue's gallery, he thought. And they wanted to take away this gem of reliability. Reliability simply means: I have to be wary of the person who doesn't show any inclination to betray me and on the other hand I have to pour all my treasures of trust, love and appreciation over the one who will betray me without a trace of hesitation. I have no doubt whatsoever that this woman...

'Well, Comrades' came a booming voice from the row of mirrors, 'who wants to comment? I know very well that it is not an easy task.'

The District Party Secretary heard the mirrors break, and after a fleeting sense of pity he felt that cold anger which was the very feeling of unreality which had dissolved for a few minutes the dirty abscess of hatred. What a terrible whore, he thought and stopped looking at her. Comrade Mikecz was sitting rigidly, her skirt tightly drawn over her knees. 'Is there anyone who wants to speak, Comrades?'

A single thin arm was raised. The palm and the yellow fingers trembled in the heat wave surging toward the ceiling. The small head with its cavities and angles was mauve-colored, like the face of a rubber puppet which can be made to express, with equal ease, opposite expressions like laughter and crying. The thin mouth showed signs of crying in the corners; the pair

of brown eyes gleamed alternately with fright, anger and weariness; the forehead with its smoothening and reappearing wrinkles flitted between the desire to escape and the nausea of unavoidable fate. The fragile body trembled like a lonely tree in a sudden rising storm.

Edit Simonovics leaned forward from the platform with half-shut eyes. The weariness and fear vanished, giving way to curiosity mingled with interest. It was almost a relief to look down on the bold heads and have the feeling that, after strolling in a well-known landscape, she had suddenly come to a ravine screened from her by some bushes. What was waiting for her, rustling mysteriously at the bottom of the ravine?

The first thing she saw emerge from the haze was a well-known pair of blue eyes which radiated innocence, a delicate nose, shy mouth, white skin, then the rounded torso, the plump arms and the hard breasts. She was inundated by a feeling of jealousy and anger. The emotion, though senseless, was not unknown to her, and she felt it had been strangling her for months on end. She found that virgin, syrupy innocence unbearable; how was it that she had never before realized all the devilish intentions that lay behind that mask of amiability? The face did not answer her questions; it remained pleasant and full of humility. She understood that the only person who could answer those questions was herself. Her right hand flew over her head, ready to strike.

‘Anything wrong, Comrade Simonovics? It’s your turn to speak.’

The hoarse, worried voice startled her. The first thing she realized was the silence, then its frame and content: the hall, the open door and the closed window, her colleagues and Comrade Mikecz, whose apprehensive face gave her a faint feeling of hope which bubbled pleasantly in her throat. ‘Nothing,’ she said quickly and drank from the glass the District Party Secretary handed her. ‘I felt dizzy for a moment. Don’t be cross with me, Comrade Mikecz, I am really . . .’ She looked up cautiously, but the ravine disappeared and Rezi’s face could not be seen any more. She took the crumpled sheet of paper and started to read very loudly.

‘Communist vigilance,’ she heard her own voice coming through a layer of insulation, ‘according to Comrade Stalin, is nothing but a weapon for fighting the struggle of the classes. Nobody in our age, when class warfare is becoming more and more acute, can doubt that the enemy will use every means to

sabotage the building of Socialism. Our Party has reminded us that the enemy will also try to worm its way into the vanguard of the working classes, the Communist Party, to undermine the work which already has been done. This indicates clearly that careful observing and exposing of the imperialist agents is the duty of Party and non-Party members.' She stopped because her voice broke. When she started speaking again, she was not reading the sentences any more. Unfamiliar words poured from her mouth like heavy pebbles. She did not understand what she was saying, for the pebbles clattered as they hit the floor around her. Nothing could be done, nothing; it had been in vain that Uncle Freddy had tried to protect her (she suddenly remembered the fight which had raged over her in the afternoon and now she felt a kind of motherly compassion for Alajos Sandor); it had been in vain to read the text of her speech over and over again trying to memorize it in the lavatory. Nothing and nobody could help her. Her face felt as if it were becoming soft, like molten wax. Who on earth could save her, who could understand her misery and loneliness, her being cheated and misguided? 'You can't be trusted with the smallest thing,' murmured Geza Simonovics, clinging to the dinghy. 'You nitwit, you could overturn a steamboat.' 'If there is no place for us in Siofok, then we can't do a thing,' screamed Rezi. 'We'll go to the mountains. Aren't you satisfied with what Bill told you? What else do you want?' 'Honestly,' hissed Alajos Sandor, 'honestly...' 'Mum,' said Mary impudently, 'you always cut your finger when you peel potatoes.' 'Dear Edit, I don't know a thing,' sighed Lautenburg. 'Honestly I don't, but somebody was complaining about you...'

'Excellent,' said Comrade Mikecz and smiled. 'Go on, Comrade Simonovics, we are all very anxious to hear...' Edit felt a flood of childish gratitude as she looked at her through a curtain of tears. What a good face, what a happy smile, what a friend after so many years of frustration and blindness. At last, at last... She dropped the sheet from her left hand and the right one closed into a fist as she went on speaking.

Dr. Vilmos Racz had decided to make his speech short and concise. Contrary to habit, he had not written it down, nor even made any notes for it. On this occasion the president of the Trade Union Council did not feel any need for premeditation because he had been preparing for this moment for years, like a conjurer who, when he steps onto the stage, has only to move his little finger to make the audience accept what it does

not want to accept: the mere possibility of what he appears to be doing. There really was no necessity for any kind of further preparation, and in fact everything went off perfectly.

The conversation with Alajos Sandor, whom he had feared most, had turned out better than he had expected. That brave, restless Theseus had long ago lost his way and was now a mere shadow of his former self: a wounded warrior, an old pensioner—probable quite harmless. Racz had promised to do what he could for Rezi, and Sandor actually seemed to believe him. After their talk, Racz had cleaned his gold-rimmed spectacles once more with the tiny piece of chamois, then picked up his briefcase and proceeded to the Ministry to report to Janos Zeller his findings concerning Lautenburg.

Returning to his office, he had checked on the progress of preparations for the meeting. From Aliz Weszelka he learned that Mrs. Mikecz had discussed the speech with at least five people, and from Mrs. Horvai that Edit Simonovics' text had been prepared by Alajos Sandor. This last item did not interest him very much; he wondered how the gallant knight would go about rescuing a drowning damsel, but since curiosity didn't belong among the systematically classified virtues (one must not be curious but well informed) he noted the information, stored it away in his mind, then immediately forgot all about it; it would emerge whenever it was needed. As for the news of Mrs. Mikecz's activities, if her stupid, confused flurry could be called an activity, this was worth a piece of Swiss chocolate to Aliz. The good woman was busily driving nails into her own coffin. It was more than amusing; it was positively agreeable.

Vilmos Racz knew that no one could break the laws of nature and of society unpunished, especially not a person who had unconditionally subjected himself to those laws. And Mrs. Mikecz, by stupidly discussing a speech with five people simultaneously, which was as childish as not talking with anyone about it, had broken the sublime dialectic law of directed spontaneity, the balance between loudly proclaimed freedom of opinion and restricted, true opinions. This, he thought, would justify the death penalty in any self-respecting, honest people's democracy; what else? Vilmos Racz sincerely approved the sentence.

When Aliz had flowed out the door, he reached for the telephone to report the latest data to the Secretary of the District Party Committee. While dialing, a gentle restlessness rose within him and he replaced the receiver. He knew himself well; he was also familiar with this slight anguish which

started at the top of the spinal cord and then pervaded his body, transmitting danger signals to his consciousness. It did not frighten him, but on the contrary he felt grateful to himself. At such times he knew that there was only one thing to do, and that was to do nothing, to stop all action, because the wavelength of any activity could disturb the faint but vitally important transmission before he had decoded it. He leaned on the table and pressed his fists against his temples. He always took into consideration the existence and force of incalculable factors, of that marginal difference between the formula of the realized and the to-be-realized, and cautiously allowed for it. Now he once again reviewed every act of his day, every scheme, every idea. He juxtaposed that which he had accomplished against what he had found unsuitable to undertake. He paired off his emotional situations with facts, then reversed everything; from the facts he inferred the basic emotive view. But he could not find a single hold into which he could fit the sharp hook of his examination. And the final, complete summary, everything in his scheme balanced to the last penny. Then why the intensifying disquiet? Without being especially troubled, he thought about this for quite a while. Through the years he had become increasingly convinced that intuition could be useful only for discovering the future and not for understanding the past, which was much more difficult and a waste of time. The cause of my disquiet is to be sought in the time to come. Once more he reached for the telephone. It was a great risk, but it could not be avoided.

The voice of the District Party Committee Secretary, however, betrayed neither impatience, nor mistrust, not astonishment. 'Yes, Comrade Racz,' it answered hoarsely, and one could hear the sounds of a new cigarette being lit. 'What can I do for you?' Racz spoke without being interrupted, giving a brief and objective account of Mrs. Mikecz's latest blunder. Then Racz was startled to hear a totally unexpected question: whom would he consider a fit replacement for her among the Communists in the firm? The question was not merely unexpected but also doubtlessly concealed a trap. Vilmos Racz knew he had to answer and unhesitatingly. But he did not find this hard to do; he had had his answer ready for a long time. First he mentioned, with barely perceptible emphasis, Mrs. Horvai; she seemed suitable for the task by virtue of her family connections, her husband being the Party Secretary of the Ministry of Justice and an old labor-movement man. He did not mention the woman's lower-middle-class origin for the

moment; there would be time enough to do so when they got to arguments. Then, as a possible alternative, he suggested Mrs. Revesz. If One-Eye were suspicious, which was hardly to be doubted, he would be suspicious of the one mentioned second; therefore he would choose the first—that is to say, the one he wanted. Excellent! The Secretary thanked him for the propositions, reminded Vilmos Racz of his promise to address the meeting if necessary, then said goodbye politely.

Racz wiped his spectacles with the tiny chamois. His anxiety had ceased. He felt good. The apple was glowing right in front of his nose; all he had to do now was to pick it. He gathered his chair under an arm and went down to the meeting. Inside the hall, he glanced at Alajos Sandor, who stood a few feet away, leaning against the wall, his head bent down. Apparently his delicate stomach could not digest Edit Simonovics' speech, Racz thought. Which was not surprising. If we imagine what the master must have written, and what the pupil must have said, then . . . Aliz Weszelka deserved another piece of milk chocolate: when the crumpled bit of paper had fluttered down, she had carefully bent over, picked it up and concealed it in the bottom of her woven shopping bag. A well-trained little bug! Vilmos Racz turned toward the platform, instinctively tightening his tie.

Zsigmond Sas rose to make a few remarks immediately after the stormy applause for Edit Simonovics died down, an angry gleam of conviction in his wide eyes. After him Geza Libaldy asked for permission to speak, and in a reprimanding but at the same time imploring tone of voice pointed out the connection between a lack of vigilance and indifference to the notices on the bulletin board. Then Lautenburg stood up and declared that the only remedy for missteps was profound and honest self-criticism, and even that, he added, practically shouting, even that was only the first step, which must be followed by deeds. Then a young woman wearing a bright-red blouse and with a tiny, five-pointed star dangling from a slim gold chain around her neck with which her fingers kept playing said that she had joined the firm only a few days before and therefore hardly had the right to speak, but considering what she had observed in even so short a space of time, she could not conceal her surprise that, even in the fifth year of the dictatorship of the proletariat, positions of trust could go to individuals whose place was elsewhere, emphatically very much elsewhere.

Alajos Sandor heard all this clearly, distinctly, but the words touched only his ear drums, never penetrating his consciousness. He thought only of eating macaroni and cheese—his favorite dish since he was a small child. A large plate of macaroni sprinkled with fragrant, finely grated Gruyère cheese, and with it a fresh, green head of lettuce with delicate, lacy folds. But at the very instant that he ravenously poked into the steaming heap he noticed that the whole plate was full of hairs. Long black hairs that coiled around the slipping, quivering soft tubes of macaroni, together with short, thin blond bristles, as if the barber who cropped his head almost bald on the instructions of his father had sprinkled the food with the residue of his clippers. Bits of hair were curling from everywhere, thin and thick, and he had to eat, and no excuse; however much he howled, stamped his feet, wept, protested, he had to cram down this dreadful mixture, had to swallow and swallow, between tears, gasping for breath, exhausted, until finally...

This was what he felt, nothing else, no shame any more, neither disillusionment nor humiliation nor rage, only this nausea, the desperate, helpless nausea of the childhood dream come true. The stinking wave of Edit Simonovics' outburst swept over his head with the vomit of her grotesque hatred and her swooning adoration on its gray crest. He just stood motionless, silent, having lost his senses, frozen—for how long? First noises reached him, then words, then sentences. At the beginning, when they had no meaning, only weight, the sentences tumbled on top of him with a dull plop, like sandbags thrown from the height of many floors; later, they slashed, tore, pulled at his helpless body, digging into his flesh with such force that he sensed from the zigzagging pain not only the danger threatening his very life but at the same time the limit of it too: that point beyond which life and death become equally meaningless.

The voice cleared, became familiar, far too familiar, very nearly unknown.

'... is why I demand,' thundered Vilmos Racz, 'that we immediately institute stern measures against all those who by this complete failure to maintain the necessary vigilance, and by disregard of our Party's warning, have become accessories to this dirty affair. I am thinking in the first place of Terez Karolinzsky. But, since I believe that our Party expects open frankness and Bolshevik courage from us Communists, I must say that I also have Comrade Mikecz in mind, and Comrade

Lautenburg too, whose responsibility has been established beyond a doubt, I consider it outrageous, esteemed Comrades, that at this difficult period in the building of Socialism such people at the head of our firm . . .'

Abruptly Sandor pushed himself away from the wall and bent over the chairs. There, looming large before him, was the gaunt, impassive face, the short crewcut hair. His glance collided with a look from behind the gold-rimmed spectacles, the mocking look of one who has already estimated, analyzed and deduced everything that will happen. He took in every tiny pattern of the tightly drawn tie, the precise line of the collar on the well-cut light-gray jacket.

'Swine,' he hissed softly between his teeth, but his voice seemed magnified to a shout: 'Swine.'

And presently he was standing outside in the street, blinking in the keen light of dusk.

It was about half past eight in the evening when Dr. Zoltan arrived at the door of Rezi's apartment. He rang the bell. There was no answer. He rang again, more firmly, longer. Again no answer. Zoltan waited patiently. He heard the elevator start from a lower floor, humming gently. It stopped on the fourth floor. Someone got out of it and banged the door. The staircase resounded dully. The oiled cable twanged once, deeply, like the string of a double bass. The doctor wiped his forehead and once again pressed his finger on the bell. Over the ring he heard the cautious opening of a door to the apartment opposite Rezi's. He turned around quickly, but there was nothing to be seen. He went over and knocked on the other door. He rang that bell too, timidly, just a short ring. No one answered. Slowly he descended the narrow stairs, keeping close to the wall.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Early in the morning Zoltan had been awakened by the telephone. He had slept deeply, dreamlessly. Extricating himself from the tepid tangle of sheets and blankets, his eyes still closed, he groped for the telephone on his night table. The wind was blowing in the open window and scattering the fine

gray particles of cigarette ash over the floor, the desk, the books, the pamphlets and newspapers.

'Hello,' he said hoarsely. He held the receiver between his naked shoulder and ear and tried to light a cigarette, but the match slipped out of his hand. He mumbled a curse, then repeated into the phone, 'Hello!'

All that came back was a confused crackle, then fat Mari's voice: 'Sorry, Comrade Zoltan, to wake you so early, but...'

'What time is it?' The doctor yawned. He slipped back under the covers with his unlighted cigarette between his lips and began to search with his left hand for the elusive matches. He still kept his eyes closed.

'It's a quarter to eight,' Mari said, then fell into startled silence. 'It is two minutes after quarter to eight, but Comrade Feldheimer said that——'

'Who?' Zoltan asked and sat up. 'Who did you say?' Feldheimer had not been heard from these past three days.

'Comrade Feldheimer is on the line and he says it's very urgent.'

'Put him on!' Zoltan shouted. 'What are you waiting for?' He was shivering. 'Is that you?' he snarled into the telephone, but his anger was tempered by a timid joy mixed with relief. 'Where the hell...?'

'Take it easy,' came Feldheimer's voice and laughed. 'Take it easy, Zoltan Zoltanovich. I know it's early, it's cold, and I probably woke you out of your beauty sleep. I hear that you've been sleeping very well lately. That's good—there's no reason for insomnia now. The air has cleared, thank God, so why shouldn't you sleep well? Anyway, forgive me for disturbing you so early, but I do have to tell you——'

'Feldheimer,' Zoltan said softly, 'where are you?'

'At the beach, Zoltan Zoltanovich. Of course you couldn't know that I was here. As a matter of fact I've been here three days. I came for a whiff of fresh air. My kind of indoor plant needs light and the clean breezes of the Danube and the mermaids. I'm in our luxurious rest home, Zoltan Zoltanovich; they even changed the sheets in my honor. I've got room nineteen, a corner room, with an excellent view up the river. Mr. Oskar, our harbor master, who has a speech defect, offered to put at my disposal a beautiful little boat, but I refused. My muscles are pretty flabby, so why should I strain them with exercise? I lie on the dock all day, basking in the sun, so tanned you wouldn't recognize me...'

'Get right back here!' Zoltan shouted.

'I'm coming,' Feldheimer said with a laugh. 'I'll fly. I'll be there within the hour. How could I stand not seeing you? The heart of the matter, Zoltan Zoltanovich, is *back from nature*, as our late lamented Comrade Rousseau would put it had he been converted to historical and dialectical materialism. Because he still believed in natural man, uncorrupted by society. A little self-criticism, Comrade Rousseau! That's why I'm coming back. You didn't think I was going to flee the country? Where to, Zoltan Zoltanovich, where to? *Selten kommt was besseres nach*, as my bourgeois father used to say. And he was right! Isn't it strange that a bourgeois father could be so right?'

'Stop it!' Zoltan croaked, thinking that he ought to hang up. But he didn't.

'Stop?' Feldheimer asked and let out a whistle. 'So that's your advice? I remember you told me the same thing a few days ago. But things have changed. They have changed qualitatively, so to speak; the subjective quantity of accumulated suspicion has become transmuted into an objective quantity of certainty. Don't you feel it too? Just think of your peaceful nights, and don't be ungrateful! So what new advice have you got for me, Zoltan Zoltanovich?'

Zoltan did not answer. He found the match and lit his cigarette.

'No advice?' Feldheimer's voice became thin. 'A pity. I thought you were smarter than that, old boy. That's why I called you at this unearthly hour. I'm in trouble, big trouble. You would hardly believe how big it is. . . . Are you listening?'

'Yes,' Zoltan replied and coughed violently. 'You can tell me all about it when you come back. I'm very busy now.' For a second he reflected, surprised, on how little he was interested in Feldheimer's troubles.

'When I come back?' Feldheimer said animatedly. 'But will I?'

Zoltan smashed down the receiver and slid back under the covers. In one minute the telephone rang again.

'I'm all out of tokens, Zoltan Zoltanovich. Please let me finish.' Why did I pick up this damned thing again? Zoltan thought. 'Will you listen to me? Promise?' came Feldheimer's whining voice.

'All right,' Zoltan answered. 'Are you sick?' He looked out the window at the foliage swaying in the wind. He thought that when he got dressed he would go down to the buffet and have a cup of coffee. That girl with black hair, Judi, would be

on duty and he could arrange . . . Violent, savage desire rushed at him, a surprising, unexpected, impatient numbness. He lit a new cigarette, 'What you do with your nights is none of my business, but if you ever come in here with your hands trembling, I'll have you thrown out,' the professor had said. Why didn't he have me thrown out before? Zoltan wondered now. He saw her strip off her blouse and drop her skirt to the floor. Her breasts were enormous and soft. 'Hurry up, old man,' Zoltan said and started to cough again.

'You want me to hurry?' Feldheimer blazed indignantly. 'The best is yet to come. The best, the juicy part. Listen carefully. You won't regret it. It's a study in social psychology. Now there was this woman sitting at the next table. What a woman! Hair black as night, black eyebrows, a silk blouse with a zipper in the back to make it easier—you know. But you do know, Zoltan Zoltanovich? And she was hot. And it was evening, almost night, at least half past nine, with a full moon. Even Marx would have taken advantage of such opportunity if he hadn't married Jenny so early in life. Engels was right: he stayed a bachelor. Well, I asked the waiter who she was, and he said he had never seen her before. I asked him, What do you think, and he said, The same thing you're thinking—hot stuff. So I go over and ask, "Is this chair free?" She answers, "It is, you may take it. Nice evening, isn't it?" "Beautiful," I say. "What will you have?" "Rum," she answers. "Two rums, please," I tell the waiter. I keep looking at her and liking her more and more. I told her my name was Gyuri and that I was a clerk, and what is her name, please. "Daniela," she says, laughing. "What!" I exclaim, surprised. "Daniela," she repeated. "Haven't you read *The Students*—the girl with the great big greyhound?" "How come?" I ask. "Well," she says, "I am always the person I have just read about. I was Titania, out of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Becky—you know, Becky Sharp. I liked her; she was a clever woman. Then I read *Nana* and for a while I . . ." Do you get it, Zoltan Zoltanovich? Diversity of identity for the sake of Socialism. A kind of ersatz freedom. Stupendous, I thought, magnificent, divine. Marry her and join a library! You go to bed with a different woman every week, and if any one is especially exciting, you just renew the book. I should have kissed her on the brow and led her straight to the registrar. But instead we talked until half past eleven about literature and other odds and ends, then I said to her, "Do you live out here or are you going back to Budapest, because in that case you must be off or you'll miss

the last bus." She looked at me and said, "If you want me to go, then I'll go, otherwise I'd be glad to say with you." Just like that unceremoniously, simply, naturally. "Two more rums," and the waiter winks at me. Then home to bed.'

'Feldheimer,' Zoltan said and sighed. He was tired. 'Do you think I am interested...?'

'Aren't you? Really? I bet you are. I was. I could hardly wait until she got undressed. "Now you'll be glad you stayed," I said to her as she put her bits of clothing on a chair. Even as a small boy I was famous for it; my father, that sweet white-haired pediatrician, blushed with happiness to have a son with such a well-developed——'

'You ass,' Zoltan said and started to laugh. But his muscles locked suddenly, as if his jaws were strapped.

'Now listen carefully,' Feldheimer went on. 'That luscious girl was walking toward the bed, stepping softly like a cat. I switched off the light, but I could still see everything. Her neck, her breasts! The firm thighs. Her knees gave way a bit when she stopped at the edge of the bed with her eyes half closed, playing for time before we got down to essentials. What style! She snuggled up to me, and her body smelled of cologne, of the Danube, of the sun. I touched her knee and slowly, slowly slid my hand upward. She shuddered. Her skin was ablaze. And then ... what do you think happened then, Zoltan Zoltanovich? Don't say a word. You can't possibly know. Marxism-Leninism has no answer to that question. Comrade Stalin never made a statement about it. What happened was that nothing happened. Not a thing, do you hear? The nerves did not function, the blood vessels did not swell—nothing! There I was, lying in the dark beside her, fresh, rested, and nothing. But I didn't even feel ashamed. She gave it another try or two, but I knew that it was all a waste of energy, absolutely useless, because ... "Too bad," she said then, a little offended. "If only you had told me..." What do you think about this as Party Secretary, Zoltan Zoltanovich? She fell asleep, rather sadly, and I lay awake, rather sadly, but later I fell asleep too. The next morning I climbed out of my virginal bed; she whimpered a little but didn't wake up. I think the unexpectedly quiet night wore her out. I went out into the garden—it was only dawn—and stood on the bank of the Danube in the cool wind. Now ask me what it was like, Zoltan Zoltanovich. Ask me!'

'What was it like?' Zoltan repeated involuntarily.

'Like a big gray glass bell, thank you for asking, a gigantic,

gray glass bubble, smooth and cold. It was perfect, enthralling, absolute, evil and inhuman. We live in this, the penny dropped in my mind, and there is no in or out, however we strain ourselves. We cannot even see out, it's so superbly constructed, for if we look through the glass we only stare into our own grinning face. Yes, Zoltan Zoltanovich, a round ball from which the air has been pumped and the void proudly proclaimed the Alpine atmosphere of happiness which everyone can inhale according to his needs. I felt I had to tell you about my discovery right away because you would appreciate its Newtonian brilliance. Here is the secret, the solution, the answer, Zoltan Zoltanovich: The smaller the omnipotence the greater the impotence—that's the logic of the globe, do you hear? The smaller the omnipotence the greater the impotence! Isn't that something?'

Zoltan sat on the edge of his bed for a long time, goose-fleshy, swinging his legs, the stub of a dead cigarette in his mouth, his mind blank. After a while he got dressed and went down to Karolinszky's office. Klara wasn't there.

As usual, the room was gleaming, light, brilliantly clean and restful. The lilac fragrance of the breeze coming through the open window mingled with the pungent smell of floor polish. Large drops of water from the morning's cleaning still glittered on the snow-white filing cabinet. On the table the professor's mail was held down with a brass lion's head paper weight. Standing guard over an empty desk tray was a vase of huge, deep-red peonies. Now and then a few of the soft petals fluttered down on the pale-gray carpet. It was an unusual sight; Karolinszky never permitted flowers on his desk or anywhere in his office. Zoltan called out into the anteroom to the old woman sitting there, 'Would you get rid of these, please.' She stumbled in obediently and took away the vase, holding it tight against her body. A few thick, velvety petals scattered on the floor. Zoltan picked them up along with those near the desk and threw them into the wastepaper basket.

Klara arrived carrying a load of papers, her pale-blue cardigan thrown across her shoulders. The doctor saw her eyes fly to the professor's desk, but she did not say anything. She passed her hand lightly over her face which had reddened, as if trying to wipe away a cobweb of anger. She moved to the filing cabinet and put away the folders she was carrying. Then she returned to the anteroom. Zoltan followed her as she hung her cardigan on the back of her chair, sat down and rolled a

sheet of paper into her typewriter. He leaned against the wall and watched.

'I see you have changed your hairdo,' he remarked after a while.

'I had to,' Klara answered. Her hair was now a huge, carefully arranged bun, revealing the fine, downy curve of her neck with its tiny brick-colored birthmark; Zoltan was the only man at the hospital who had ever seen it before. 'One of these days I'm going to cut it all off.'

'That would be a pity,' Zoltan said.

'You think so?'

'Yes, I do.'

'In that case I'll think it over first,' she said. 'Do you happen to have a cigarette?'

'Yes, I do.' He held out the box. 'Feldheimer called this morning.'

'Really?' Klara asked, although she already knew. Mari had immediately notified Angela, who told her friend, the little woman in admissions, and she then passed the news on to Comrade Goldman's secretary, who called Klara. Her green eyes clouded over with hatred. 'And what did he say?'

'Nothing,' Zoltan answered and looked down at the carpet under his feet. 'He's crazy.'

The telephone rang; Klara lifted the receiver. 'Speaking,' she said almost inaudibly. 'No, he didn't come in today, Comrade Raymond. He's out of town. Quite unexpectedly. Yes.' Her lips were quivering. 'Unfortunately we don't know that, Comrade Raymond. Probably an extended trip. Perhaps even weeks. Of course, I'll tell him the minute he gets back.' She hung up and jotted down a few words in a notebook.

'Crazy,' she said, 'of course he's crazy. Just send him to a lunatic asylum. That's where he belongs.' She began to type.

The old woman entered with the empty vase in her hand, halting abruptly in the doorway. 'What shall I do with this, Comrade, please?'

'Put it down in that corner,' Klara said without stopping.

'Wouldn't you rather take it home?'

'Yes, I'll take it home. It would only get broken here—and it was such an honor.'

Zoltan remembered: the vase had been a prize; she had been named the best office worker at the hospital. He remembered it clearly; he had distributed the prizes.

'Shall I wrap it for you?' the old woman said.

'Yes, please,' Klara said. 'You'll find some old newspapers

in the bottom of the cabinet.'

'He has all sorts of half-baked theories,' Zoltan said. 'What in God's name should I do with him?'

'Leave God out of it,' the girl said.

Zoltan leaned out the window. A huge black ZIM was moving up the incline; it came to a stop at the revolving entrance door. A short woman with sloping shoulders in a gray suit stepped out and with a firm gesture banged the door behind her. The car cautiously backed into the parking area and stopped next to the ancient DKW.

The telephone rang again. Klara got up from the typewriter.

'Hello,' she said. 'No, he didn't come in today. He is away—he had to leave suddenly.... Yes, out of town.' Then, after listening a while: 'Unfortunately we don't know that. Probably for a longer time. Weeks, perhaps.... Yes, of course. The moment he arrives.'

Zoltan held out the packet of cigarettes. 'Want one?'

'No, thank you,' the girl said.

'Aren't you going to make a note of that phone call?'

'A Mrs. Fellner.'

'Who's that?'

'I have no idea,' she said. 'Better give me one after all.' The doctor lit the cigarette and lifted it to Klara's lips. 'What you do with your nights is none of my business, but if you ever...' Zoltan remembered. 'My hand isn't trembling now. May I operate?' Smoke got into his eyes and drew tears.

Dr. Wass came toward him in the corridor, holding a notebook in his hand. 'Glad I found you, my dear Party Secretary,' he said impetuously. 'I've been looking for you all over the building. I should have known where...'

'What do you want?' Zoltan asked gruffly.

'We do have one or two things to discuss in connection with the current state of affairs here, don't you think? I'd like your official opinion on a few troublesome little problems...'

'I'm very busy. Come see me this afternoon.'

'I see,' the Assistant Chief Physician said, his eyes narrowing. 'Naturally, if you're very busy, that's different. After all, I don't wish to keep you just now from your activities in the people's interest.'

'Make it three o'clock,' Zoltan said quickly. On the wall opposite he saw a ladybug struggling up the slippery wall. It fell to the floor on its back, its tiny legs kicking in space.

'Thank you, it will be a great pleasure,' came the melodious

tenor of Dr. Wass's voice. 'I appreciate your kind invitation.'

The coffee shop was still empty. Clean ashtrays shone on the tables; the chairs looked freshly dusted. Judi moved quickly and deftly in the clouds of steam which the coffee machine emitted from time to time. On the glass counter in front of her cups and saucers were lined up in military order with tiny spoons. Zoltan stopped inside the doorway. The girl gave a nervous start; a few drops of coffee spilled onto the saucers she held. With one hand she brushed back her black hair which the breeze had made unruly. For a moment it all reminded Zoltan of the legs of the ladybug on the floor. Then she took a white paper napkin from under the counter and carefully began to wipe the spilled coffee out of the saucers.

Zoltan moved into the shop. 'What have you got for me?' he asked, leaning against the counter. Her yellow linen blouse gaped in the front as she bent over the counter for another cup; her breasts were huge and soft.

'Whatever you like, Comrade Zoltan,' she said softly. 'A nice strong double?'

'Yes,' the doctor said. 'A double espresso.'

'In a jiffy,' the girl said. 'Let me finish this first.'

'Who's drinking all this coffee?'

'There's some kind of conference going on in Comrade Goldman's office. Their machine is out of order, so I...' She measured some coffee out of a tin box.

'Will you be busy long?'

'Fairly,' the girl said quietly.

'Until noon?' Zoltan asked.

'Definitely.'

'And this evening?'

'I don't know. Something always happens.'

'Always,' the doctor said. 'You've forgotten the sugar.'

'I don't know what I'm doing this morning,' the girl replied.

In the doorway Comrade Goldman's secretary tapped her foot impatiently. 'Judi darling, for heaven's sake, those men will kill me if I don't bring that coffee.'

At the porter's desk Vince Vincze saluted stiffly. 'Reporting to Comrade Party Secretary that in the course of last night nothing particular occurred. I am going home.'

'Nothing,' Zoltan said. 'Splendid. Go on home, Uncle Vince, and have a good sleep.'

He looked out at the street through the revolving door. The huge black ZIM was no longer there, only his shabby, antediluvian DKW.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The car jolted, hesitated and came to a stop in front of a tobacco shop on Malinovsky Boulevard.

'Two packets of Terv, please, Comrade Biro,' said the colonel from the wide, comfortable seat of his new black ZIM. This would be the time to escape somewhere, to get on a train and just go, the colonel thought. No preparations, no announcements, just a light bag with a couple of shirts and socks.

Outside, beyond the foaming white clouds, the blue sky revealed itself. What a good time the angels must be having, always in the sunshine. Some people think that it would be boring to be an angel, but shouldn't we ask those who know?

He became aware that his chauffeur—a plainclothes lieutenant in State Security, whose flattened nose suggested a boxer's career—was still holding the door of the car and waiting for further orders.

'Two packets of Terv,' the chauffeur repeated without emphasis, but his reproachful look indicated that he did not approve of this sudden resumption of smoking and, what's more, considered it his duty to report it to the superiors concerned. But he turned obediently to cross the sidewalk. 'And a box of matches,' the colonel called after him. Although he knew that his chauffeur had duties to perform other than driving, he was never much bothered by it; he could balance off that surveillance. He sat back and again thought about the possibility of a journey.

The notion had occupied his mind more and more these past weeks; he had played with it, colored it, polished it, built it up in the minutest detail from the moment of arrival somewhere, the first walk, the first rich, ample lunch. He acted it all out with appropriate gestures during his bits of free time in the mornings, during the drive to his office, concealed behind the newspaper, during the desperately boring conferences, but chiefly in the night, when he could enjoy in total privacy the amusing story of his untraceable disappearance. Where would he go? Actually it did not matter, for the colonel had realized long ago that there was no greater pleasure than aimlessness. The lilac-scented wave surging from the hills they were now passing communicated to him, precisely and unmistakably, the essence of his desire, even its objective. The colonel smiled. That senseless, peevish anguish which had filled him after his talk with Karolinszky and been intensified by the optimistic yet

ominous disclosures of poor Alex on the telephone subsided all of a sudden. A strange tranquillity fell upon him, an agreeable trance. He rolled down the window of the car and looked out between the white curtains into the twilight. Above the foliage he saw the lights of the hospital go on, and at the very same instant he saw the old bulb dangling from a dusty wire start to flicker in the furnished room on the Schellingstrasse in Munich. The frail figure of Irmgard Weesenmayer hovered in the shadow, though God knows he hadn't thought of her for more than twenty years. The music had started under the Japanese lanterns of the open-air restaurant: a piano, an accordion, a fiddle and a drum, *You made me love you, I didn't want to do it . . .* so you're going to Hamburg on business tomorrow, *I guess you always knew it*, if there is another woman you can tell me, it's no good spoiling your fun just to be considerate of me, and about when do you think you'll return, *Liebling*?

But the *Krasni MaK* was waiting for him on the olive-green waters, with English machine tools in her belly and the proper papers in the captain's cabin, and so he left behind Irmgard Weesenmayer, Adolf Hitler, the giant boot-shaped beer mugs, the S. A. Brownshirts, the comrades dreaming of the Bavarian Soviet Republic. A few days later, beyond the mouth of the Neva, the dome of the Admiralty loomed up and the lacy façade of the Winter Palace, the *Aurora*, whose old cannons had roared out the birth of the new epoch. He had never returned—never. Why should he have? Leave the promised land?

He shuddered because he knew that one cannot escape from oneself except to a former self. The big question was still whether that young fellow on the deck of the *Krasni MaK* was the same man who now . . . The colonel rolled the window up and let the curtain fall back. An intense, sharp longing for the Schellingstrasse struck him like a knife. Once, for two days, he had managed to escape from the treadmill of Party work to the Alps, the narrow path through the pine woods, the squirrels eating hazelnuts out of your hand, the lizards basking on the hot stones in the glades, with the avidity of life-instinct and the panic of sudden death in their frightened emerald eyes.

It was not for his own youth that he longed but rather for the possibility of making decisions, the power of his own will. Because that had been his last moment of life. He still could have rid himself then of everything that was to happen later. All it would have taken was a slight hesitation, a glance or a

movement, a little quiet emotion on the station platform. Instead of looking down at scattered orange peels and crumpled newspapers, he should have looked into Irmgard's brown eyes. But wouldn't that, too, have been in vain? Could the sight of a woman's tears tilt the sensitive equilibrium of the spirit when he was engaged in arresting all mankind's flood of tears? Perhaps, perhaps not. Perhaps it was a mistake to clatter up the steps of the train, which was already in motion, but perhaps it would have been a greater blunder to return to Irmgard and the Schellingstrasse. Who knows what kind of unknown forces pull us about on invisible wires?

During the past months his fear of death had increased in exact proportion to the decrease of his curiosity about it. It was as if the rapidly calcifying arteries, the more and more frequent dizzy spells and the breathlessness were reminders of that mysterious, complicated and constantly broken agreement he had contracted at birth or even before—with whom?—the significance of which he had only recently discovered. I always believed the dead knew things the living don't know, he thought, watching the graceful curve of a tennis ball whizzing by, which reminded him of the wealth of unattainable beauties in the world, but apparently I was mistaken. Well, well. I am not dead yet. I am still alive. And I don't want to die. I want to get away from here.

'Stop here, Comrade Biro, if you please,' he said, and then got out of the car.

He stood in the misty dusk which slowly flooded the winding Pasaret Road. On the opposite side a silver pine stood tall in the garden of a two-storied villa. A bus came from the direction of the terminal, rattling, empty, its headlights suddenly lighting up the settling patches of fog. The street was deserted. He looked at his watch. It was a few minutes past eight. The colonel had debated for an hour whether or not to keep the appointment with Karolinszky and then Alex Matrai's telephone call had come. That decided him.

He had left orders with his adjutant to deliver Karolinszky at exactly seven minutes after nine o'clock; now, he still had an hour, a whole hour. Why had he come so early? Simple—he wanted to walk, to have a breath of air, look around. He wanted to see the Karolinszky villa, see the pictures, the furniture, the carpets, the books, the desk. A childish curiosity seized him: What does the professor keep in the bottom drawer of his desk? At his childhood home, when the farm laborers had come before his father on their weekly visits, one

after the other, hat in hand, to lodge their complaints, requests, wishes, on that day his father permitted him to come into his study, to get acquainted with the men and they with him. He would watch with beating heart to see whether the old gentleman would open the bottom drawer of the carved oak desk. There were exciting things in the other drawers too—colored mechanical pencils, collapsible fountain pens, inflatable balloons, fasteners for unidentified purposes—but in the bottom drawer, the key to which dangled on the old gentleman's watch chain, lurked the most exciting sight of all: a writhing, coiled appendix. Why did the old gentleman have his appendix preserved in alcohol? Was it because in his youth that kind of operation was still dangerous and this was his way of preserving the memory of a great adventure? Or was it because his father, who had an indiscriminate collector's craze, could not part even with this redundant part of his body? There was the appendix in the sealed phial, writhing greasily like a dead caterpillar, and one just had to look at it, look at it until . . . What would a famous surgeon keep in the bottom drawer of his desk? A brain preserved in alcohol? His own? Or nothing? The colonel wiped his moist forehead. His old curiosity suddenly ran dry within him again, and the anguished disquiet of the morning returned. Why had he come so early?

A ZIM similar to his, but coffee-brown, was carefully descending Aron Gabor Street. He saw the flash of a familiar, fat, almost unhealthily bloated face behind the flapping white curtains of the window, pale-blue, watery eyes which were not sufficiently distorted by the convex lenses of the gold-rimmed spectacles to hide the weary panic lurking in them. The man in the car was the department chief of central Agitprop. The colonel had disliked him intensely because of his pompous superciliousness until last autumn, when, quite accidentally, during a three-day hunting party, he suddenly understood the man's terrible dread, the judicious, intelligent sadness and fear which he hid beneath self-imposed assurance. Ever since he had felt close to him.

The colonel waved and winked, then turned to his chauffeur. 'Would you please tell Comrade Vargyas to come here for me at eleven. No, better make it midnight.'

'Midnight,' the chauffeur repeated, touching his forehead with his forefinger.

The colonel walked slowly up Aron Gabor Street. On his way to the Karolinszky villa he had to make a short detour to

avoid even the possibility of bumping into his colleague, the young, already balding colonel, son of the Minister for National Defense, who lived on the corner in a pretty ochre-yellow villa. The colonel always felt his flesh creep when he came near that haughty, self-assured young man, who, about a year ago, had pissed into the mouth of a prisoner, who, three weeks before, had still been the Secretary of the Party Central Committee and Minister for Home Affairs. What if the colonel were to come out his door now? He didn't want the news of his experiment—that was how he termed the meeting during his telephone conversation with the major-general early in the afternoon—to spread through the state apparatus sooner than it should.

He stopped for a second in front of the Karolinszky villa, his heart beating irregularly from climbing the steep street. The thick, dark chestnut foliage rustled. At the foot of the lilac bushes that flanked the high railing, footsteps sounded faintly. Branches creaked, gravel rattled. The garden gate stood open. There were no lights anywhere, but high up a pale half moon shone faintly, and the winding white pebble garden path flashed now and then. He walked slowly, tripped once and blushed in the darkness. He heard a car climbing the street; the yellow feelers of its headlights broke through the bushes, explored the edge of the villa. The colonel leaned against the garden wall, still pleasantly warm from the day's heat, and placed a tablet on the tip of his tongue. Immediately the spasm eased, but he did not move on. He gazed at the caretaker's window; no sound or light came from it. The roaring of the wind abated, and all of a sudden there was empty silence. Asleep, the colonel thought. Or are they dead? Shuddering, he walked on to the door of the villa, dug the key out of his pocket, carefully peeled the soft sealing wax off the door and entered.

A staircase faced him in the darkness. With eyes suddenly as keen as a cat's, he saw the well-rubbed, shining brass bars that held down the deep pile stair carpet. Eighteen steps. He started sweating again, strongly, disagreeably. This was the foyer. He knew the ground plan well; there were three sketches of it in Karolinszky's file. On the left were the bathroom, the bedroom of the professor's wife, a built-in wardrobe, a guest room and, opposite, beyond sliding glass doors, the hall proper, with the professor's study opening from it to the right and the dining room to the left. Odd how at home you can feel in a completely strange house, especially if you know everything about

the owner, the colonel thought. A cold, piercing anger spread in back of his forehead. The question was not why he had come so early but why had he come at all. Crossing the hall quickly, he raised the blinds and opened the balcony door wide. A cool, pure wind penetrated the staleness of the room. The colonel stepped outside.

What would he say to him? My dear Professor, don't believe appearances; appearances are deceptive. It's true that at a distance I might appear to be an executioner, but look at me closely: this hairy chest hides a benevolent heart. I love flowers and children. Believe me, I've told a lot of lies in my life, but I am not lying now. Ladies and gentlemen, this is a deceived soul's struggle with itself; here you may see the tragedy of a life, half price for children in groups, free for soldiers and new Party members, step right up and see the fever of a youth that longed for justice but became the victim of circumstances. Am I going to complain of my grievances? Ask for his forgiveness? Acquittal? Judgment? It's cold, damned cold. Has it ever occurred to you, my dear Professor, how capricious the weather is? Everyone else has noticed; strange that you should not. Why do you think that is, Professor? You are simply not interested? Extraordinary how in some respects you are just like everyone else—please don't take that amiss. Have you observed that people, after a certain time, are not interested in any interpretation of a phenomenon but in the thing itself? I have come to the conclusion that people, perhaps because of living in a world that boasts of having solved all the mysteries, have no desire any more to solve the mystery; they have understood that knowledge, instead of leading them to the unknown, separates them from it.

The fact is, it's a pleasant feeling to know that mystery exists. Funny, isn't it? The awareness of mystery is what differentiates them from us who, on the excuse of breaking with the tradition of obscurity, have, as priests of a still more obscure tradition, subjugated society and violated that delicate, complicated structure which took thousands of years to build: the human community. And that community has replied to this extraneous disturbance by tightening the invisible bonds within itself, a unity of silent resistance. But the tale does not end here, Professor. Because that unity welds together the components of the community but it also upsets that imponderable, judicious balance between man and God, reality and the beyond-reality; between the souls of those longing for glamour

and those who strive for rationality. The effect of the tilted balance makes itself felt not merely in respect to society, or in people's way of thinking, but also causes our fellow men to exchange the gold reserve of their connection with the universe for the small change of superstition. The astrologers, the palmists, the fortunetellers have multiplied, my dear Professor. Behind lowered Venetian blinds, in ill-lit, stuffy, overfurnished rooms, middle-aged men and women sit and passionately enumerate the not inconsiderable years of their age to the fortunetellers and soothsayers. The excommunicated escape after their ill-paid working hours into another world where the imagination is unfettered by data, parades, study groups, trade-union conferences and celebrations of the revolution. Everyone has at least one reliable oracle-woman with whose help one can contact the current of the beyond, which, on receiving one into its drift, eases the burden of everyday monotony and sets everything in its rightful place for the payment of a modest commission. The Era of the Gypsy Woman has dawned, my dear Professor!

'You're a highbrow,' he could hear the professor say. 'Are you a Jew?' The colonel smiled to himself. Was this what he wanted to tell him? This bullshit?

It was already completely dark. Among the needles of the slim silver pine tree standing outside the window of the professor's study tiny spots of light scurried faintly. The colonel stared at the two red spots of the slowly jogging funicular and the filtered lights of the villas on the slope opposite the balcony where he stood. The whole mountainside began to glitter, scintillate in the cool current of night air. He felt very cold. For twenty years he had been tormented by a homesickness for this town, twenty dreadful years, twenty unbearable years. How often, on teeth-chattering winter nights, had they assembled in his narrow, damp room on the Arbat, just to try and name the cross streets of Budapest in their correct sequence, from the Boráros Square to the Margit Bridge, and the one who made a mistake had to give the others half his vodka ration for the evening. How often had they enacted the last stage of their homecoming, when the train would stop in the Eastern Railway Station and they would step into the dusty lights of Baross Square. How often had they speculated on who would live where, whether one would return to a former apartment or move to a place he had always wanted to live ever since childhood. And then, seven years after his homecoming, he had come to hate this town, so immoderately,

cruelly, irrevocably.

He turned around and went back into the hall and sat down in the comfortable easy chair by the white marble fireplace. Behind the chair, on the glass top of a small tea table standing against the wall, the Keknyelu wine was cooling in a silver ice bucket meant for champagne. These servants, he thought, they have no idea how to treat wine. He closed his eyes. 'I received the dossier you sent over some days ago,' Alex had said over the telephone, and from this it became evident to the colonel that something was wrong: he had not sent Alex any dossiers. Alex had called him on the K line, which was used exclusively to connect leading functionaries and was therefore only half-heartedly tapped. But obviously Alex still wasn't taking chances: he had used a nonexistent dossier as a cover. 'I've examined the stuff,' Alex said then, sounding perfunctory, 'and I think that on the whole it contains some good ideas.' He could hear Alex light a cigarette. 'Otherwise, how are you, old warrior? What's your blood pressure? Mine is going straight up but I don't care any more. Who cares about his blood pressure on such a lovely spring day?' Here his voice rose, clear and strong. 'It's exactly the same kind of beautiful weather as when we met that day on Petrovka Street, remember?'

The colonel heard him draw on his cigarette, then say good-bye and hurriedly put down the receiver as if he considered the whole conversation a bore. The colonel bent his head into his hands.

That morning, before their meeting, he had telephoned the Marx-Engels Institute where he was working and asked for two days' sick leave, then strolled down to the Tretyakov Gallery to look at his favorite paintings. There were hardly any people in the pleasantly tepid rooms, just some students from a girls' school, eyes round with wonder, wearing freshly ironed, black worsted skirts, running after the milk-white-complexioned teacher who, despite her youth, had a severe look and seemed to be counting them every minute with her quivering, dark-blue gaze. Then a general in full-dress uniform marched through the narrow corridors linking the rooms of the gallery, ruddy faced, short yet hussar-like, his hands behind his back as if he were not in a picture gallery at all but on his way to review the troops. He ignored his numerous attendants who tried to keep up with him even to get in front of him in order to throw the next door open before him.

The colonel stopped in front of his favorite paintings, one after the other, a little inattentively and anxiously, like a per-

son who has too much time but not enough to really examine anything. He stood in front of the *Rye* undulating under its infinite blue sky, ripe and fulfilled, and perhaps for the first time in his life he envied Sishkin that moment when he sat in the shade of the poplars by the brook and began to paint the countryside. Then there was the *Autumn Bouquet's* lonely, melancholy beautiful woman, whom Ryepin most certainly must have loved but who most certainly could not stand the painter; you could tell by her face. For a while he cheerfully watched Levitan's *Bears* romping in the sharp sunlight that trickled through the huge trees, and this always refreshed him like a childhood memory, though in his childhood he had never seen a bear; in fact, his father had once driven away a man who happened to pass by the estate with his dancing bear. He lingered by Fedotov's miniatures (he particularly liked *The Governess' Arrival*, a little masterpiece in sad brown and inquisitive green), glanced at Vereschagin's heap of skulls, then sat down opposite the picture he dreaded and could not liberate himself from: *Ivan the Terrible Kills His Son*.

He looked at his watch. It was a quarter to twelve; he had to be off. Why was he meeting Alex? They couldn't change anything any more, could not solve anything; it would give them another chance to bemoan the fallibility of the world, the absurdity of life and the wonders of Socialism in the making. He went down to the cloakroom where the bitter odor of wet overcoats, fur collars, fur caps and rubber galoshes was already softly spreading; he sorted out his belongings, wound his brown woolen scarf around his neck and stepped outdoors. The snow was still falling, continuously since yesterday afternoon. Thick, low clouds swirled above the roofs, dispiritedly, irritably. Not to mention, he thought, the fact that both of us are surely being watched, and their first question the day after tomorrow will be, What were you talking about so excitedly two days ago at twelve noon on Petrovka Street? What am I going to answer? That I was complaining to Alex that the Post-Impressionist room had been closed until further notice?

He came off the bridge over the Moskva River and onto the easy slope that led along the Kremlin's barbaric, beautiful stone wall. The snowfall stopped suddenly and the frost creaked under his feet. All of a sudden, from very high up, he saw the immense square, the silent line of people in front of the red marble Mausoleum waiting obediently for the door to be opened at twelve, the brick-colored lace of the History Museum, the gaudy onion-shaped cupolas emerging in the

sunlight which flashed with its glittering, unrestrainable gaiety, casting the magic gloss of improbability over this whole damned world, and his heart contracted again with the same helpless emotion as when he had first come here innumerable years ago. For he still loved this town, despite the hunger, the cold, the death; despite the bloody, tawdry melodramas. He loved it madly, a little insanely, as one loves one's executioner, the last being to touch one with the warmth of life. His love was a flagstaff on the sunken ship of youth, honesty, valor and honor, a staff that even the filthy surging tide of reality could not submerge completely. What kind of magic spell was this? Perhaps the bonds of disillusionment, humiliation and hatred are stronger than those of love. Perhaps we have as much need for tormenting as for caressing, and we find a more complete satisfaction in the fear caused by terror and in the solitude engendered by fear than in the petty-bourgeois jabbering called happiness. Does the dreadful pleasure that arises in our body at the sight of torture and execution—does it point to a distortion in us, or our true condition: the clash of natural instinct and unnatural awareness? The inference being that our striving to get behind the bulwark of power is not in order to carry through a purpose but because we want to create the most effective means for the achievement of our instincts; we want to free the way for socially sanctioned cruelty, for the total expression of ourselves. In this context it is almost the same whether we torture or are being tortured. For masturbation too brings on the orgasm, and quite often it is even more complete.

The disgusting part about the hypocrisy of power is not that it preaches utopia while setting up the gallows but that it glorifies the already erected gallows with the pious legend of divine justice instead of sounding the trumpets: come, we are hanging them, breaking them on the wheel, shooting them, and it is much more exciting than leaning against the stove and daydreaming about the rising standard of living! But the fundamental nature of power is envy: the fewer the people who have the right and the means to give full vent to their instincts, the more enjoyable it becomes to those who possess that right and that means. That is why power is never sustained by illusions, but power always supports illusions: namely, the hope that one day it will be your turn to do as you like.

He began walking faster. The clock on Spasky had struck twelve. What the hell, he thought as he saw Alex in the distance, walking up and down on the corner, restless, unshaven,

chewing on the long paper tip of a *Kazbek*. He could not feel sorry for him. Why should he pity him? Why should he pity himself? For a while he listened absent-mindedly to the peevish, bitter grumbling: he could not make out what Alex was talking about and he was not very interested; unknown danger had lost its attraction and only the nausea of the familiar fear was lurking in him now. Then he looked at the square facing the Bolshoi Theater, the whirring of baby carriages wrapped in the pale-yellow veil of sunshine, the white-scarved young mothers, romping little girls and little boys, and from his stomach up into his throat crept that agonizing hatred which, if let loose, would have been sufficient to destroy everybody in the square. He turned his back on his grumbling friend and went home to tea. That same night Alex was arrested, he himself two days later.

The colonel opened his eyes and looked around the dark room. The picture of snowy Moscow dissolved and its place was taken by a black, aimless emptiness. Today's telephone call could have only one meaning: Alex was threatened. By whom? For a while the colonel pondered over this. He, who knew the names of those under arrest and those about to be arrested—only those of importance, naturally—could not remember Alex's name on any of the lists. It certainly had nothing to do with the doctor's business. It might be just a nuisance, of course. This wouldn't be the first time that the Great Wise Leader of the Great Hungarian People had locked up a Soviet agent—without knowing that the fellow was one—and Moscow had to intervene quietly.

The colonel picked up the telephone and called Nikolai Golubkin, cultural attaché of the Soviet Embassy, saying that he wished to speak with him the next morning at the usual place, at the usual time. He was sure that a quiet talk with this sallow, middle-aged man, whose eyes, with their deep black wrinkles, testified to his being partial to drink and women, would settle the matter easily. Major Golubkin had no objection: he was the colonel's direct contact with N.K.V.D. headquarters in Moscow. The colonel, as a Russian agent like Alex, received from Golubkin those orders and instructions which concerned him exclusively. Neither the supreme command of the party nor even General Tarakanov knew about them. For a moment this thought filled him with a childish delight: he couldn't stand that pig with his thick head and his endless cursing. But a moment later the colonel's mind turned back to Alex. There was always the possibility that Alex's arrest had

been decided on in Moscow. What was he going to do *then*? What if *over there* they had already decided...? If, for instance, one of those madmen had got the idea of replacing the gradually aging Party workers with new, younger men? To whom could he turn to? With whom could he talk? The major general with that smirk around his lips popped out of the dimness.

The colonel leaped from the easy chair and hurried into the professor's study.

He stopped behind the desk, his back to the window. The moon, appearing in a chasm in the clouds, illuminated the room for an indecisive moment, slightly at a tilt. His glance fell on the leather-bound album of photographs lying on the dusty surface, then moved to a yellow-shaded floor lamp, then to the crowded bookcase, until the room was plunged into darkness again. But still he did not switch on the light.

When he had alighted from his car and had started his walk up the steep streets, he became possessed by the strange and inexplicable feeling that he had passed this way before, though he never had. Then the cold wind had diverted his attention; now he felt it still more distinctly in this room aflutter with dim shadows. What was it? He began to stride up and down the room. He was not nervous, nor exhausted, nor was there any trace of uncertainty in him; on the contrary, it came as a definite, positive awareness: his walk up the steep rise reminded him spookily of his walk in Moscow, of the pavement leading from the Tretyakov to Petrovka. The equilibrium of memory was upset, and the top layer slid back in space and time to the level of the original experience. He came to a sudden halt, angrily. Then, as if against his will, he sat down at the table and absentmindedly opened the album.

But the darkness was frustrating. A shiny piece of paper came to hand, a loose photograph. He kept turning it, looking at it, then suddenly stood up and walked to the window, where he held it up to the lurking light. The professor was turning his back on him, yes, on him personally, with a characteristically perfunctory, repudiating gesture, as if in the instant the picture was taken he had known that years later this would be his answer to a question that had not even been put to him. The colonel laughed sourly. Serves me right, he thought, and carefully placed the photograph back in the album. Then suddenly he took it out again and slid it into his hip pocket next to the pistol. If all I have come here for is to rummage among photographs, I deserve this rebuke, but if...

There was no visible or tangible similarity between the two walks. It was necessary to meet with poor Alex in Moscow, even if it did seem senseless. But it was not necessary to meet with the professor even if the meeting did seem to have a meaning. Back then he was the pursued, now the pursuer. Then he lived outside the boundaries of power; now he lived within those boundaries. Poverty had changed into pleasant prosperity. By going to Petrovka he had accepted a risk. By having the professor brought here he assumed no risk whatsoever. So where was the resemblance? Was it merely an obsession, a somersault of his overstrung nerves, a last effort of a sick body to justify its existence? A sentimental journey into the past, which seeks to rouse some kind of compassion for itself? What was this acute, savage, never-before-experienced fear of death in his brain?

But he had no time left to think about it. Outside, in front of the villa, a car stopped. Footsteps approached. The drawer! I didn't look in the bottom drawer, and now I'll never know . . . Lights went on. In the doorway, the professor stood, his finger on the switch. He wore an impeccable dark-gray suit, white silk shirt, a wine-red tie and suede shoes. His face was smooth, calm, freshly shaven.

The professor took the slim, moist green neck of the bottle, lifted it out of the slowly melting ice and poured wine into two cut-glass goblets, carefully, attentively, then tasted it with the tip of his tongue.

'Tepid,' he remarked, shaking his head. 'We need exactly thirty-five more minutes for it to be just right. But what can we do?' He lifted his glass high and with a polite movement of his left hand invited the colonel, who was still standing in the doorway of the study, to come closer. 'Our health!'

'Our health!' the colonel said hoarsely and drank a small mouthful.

'Still, it's quite palatable,' the professor said almost apologetically and filled his glass again. 'Won't you take a seat? Very few people realize that the cooling of white wines requires a good deal of experience, knowledge and, I might almost say, anxious love. In the first place, it is a question of the right proportions, of that invisible-to-the-naked-eye dividing line which separates the artificial from the natural. Undoubtedly the ability to discriminate in this way is innate rather than instilled; nevertheless, the sign of the good servant is that he combines both kinds of skill. The servant who tries to re-

place a sense of proportion by some kind of routine, and half-heartedly pretends to be imbued by vocation, although he merely endeavors to assure his livelihood, such a servant should be discharged after the first day. Am I boring you?’

‘On the contrary!’ the colonel said. He placed his glass on the table.

‘Of course,’ the professor continued and leaned back in the deep armchair, comfortably stretching his legs, ‘the real trouble, as everyone knows, is that nowadays the training of domestics, valets, footmen and other temporary help leaves much to be desired from every point of view. We are witnessing the deterioration of servants. While seeming submissive, they bite their master in the back; while showing loyalty, they are merely cowards; while pretending unselfishness, they are ridiculing their protector. As for their craftsmanship, as our experience here demonstrates we cannot hold a very high opinion of it.’

‘Quite,’ the colonel said.

‘I am glad we are of the same opinion,’ the professor said. Strong, sharp moonlight glimmered on the balcony door. ‘It is a lovely evening.’

‘Very nice.’

‘It is going to be a hot summer.’

‘According to some people.’

‘They might be mistaken.’

‘Certainly not.’ The colonel gulped down his wine, shuddering.

‘May I fill your glass?’

‘Heavens no!’ the colonel exclaimed, laying the palm of his right hand prohibitively on top of his glass. He stood up.

The professor looked at him attentively, his head sideways. ‘Are you in a hurry?’ he asked presently. ‘A pity. I really am sorry.’

In the glittering moonlight in front of the villa, leaning against the half-open door of a large black Hillman, three young men in raincoats were smoking and talking. When they saw the colonel appear, his head bent, hands deep in his pockets, they fell silent and respectfully put out their cigarettes. But the colonel passed without a word, not even deigning to glance at them. When he had gone a few steps he turned and said roughly, ‘Take him back.’ The young man on the edge of the group leaped toward the door to the villa. ‘Are you in a hurry?’ the colonel snapped. ‘Calm down. You can drive him back half an hour from now and still get off duty on time.’

The young man drew his neck down into the turned-up collar and obediently returned to the car. The colonel continued on his way.

At the corner he stopped. The moon was covered by a large gray cloud; everything was suddenly dark and a few drops of cold rain fell. The colonel took out the packs of cigarettes that had been lying unopened in his pocket, turned them round and round, looking absent-mindedly at the crumpled dirty-gray paper with red printing on it, then opened one with flustered, clumsy hands. He was abruptly hit by the bitterish, dusty fragrance of the dry tobacco, but he did not light a cigarette.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Gortvai belonged to that unfortunae generation born after the First World War which acquired but a single wisdom in the course of its short life: it is possible to sleep anywhere. Gortvai, along with many of his contemporaries, acquired this wisdom at the end of January 1943, about one hundred and twenty kilometres west of Voronyezh, in the middle of a night which was loud with the roar of cannons and the explosion of bombs, at a temperature of forty-five degrees below zero. It is possible to sleep anywhere, the utterly exhausted young man thought at the time, unaware that this simple truth—which only soldiers and infants really know—would serve as consolation throughout his future life. One can sleep anywhere. At the foot of snowdrifts, in pouring rain, in slimy swamps, on stairs, under a rain of bombs. Gortvai and his generation absorbed this lesson, converted it into an integral part of the bloodstream, the bone structure and the nervous system, and as the years piled up around him and one could already hear, behind the rhythmical applause of official enthusiasm, the maledictions of the imprisoned and the snapping of the vertebrae of those being executed, he put that first wisdom into general practice: one can live anywhere. Or, more simply: one must live, must live.

He glanced at his wrist watch. The woman, after having casually disclosed the fate of poor Zibolen (of course you couldn't tell whether it was true or merely part of a carefully set trap), assured him once more that the Party and the state

were making benevolent efforts on Gortvai's behalf to save him from the obvious consequences of the friendship between him and Zibolen. It was not going to be too difficult, the woman added, for 'it was well known that strong and unbreakable ties bound Gortvai to the regime of the working people.' There wouldn't be any difficulty about this matter; it was only that ... With a slight smile she handed Gortvai a pink folder. 'There, Comrade Gortvai. In exactly twenty minutes you'll open this file and read its contents. Would you like a cup of coffee? In exactly twenty minutes.' And she disappeared as vigorously as she had arrived.

Once more Gortvai in the slowly darkening room. The pink folder lay on the low coffee table in front of him. His first thought was to open it at once. The sentence, he thought to himself, the sentence, but his hand jerked back. Twenty minutes ... The upper right-hand corner of the pink portfolio curled sarcastically. Gortvai looked at this stupid dog's ear with interest. The first tidal wave of consternation which the interview had produced retreated and gave way to some kind of ebbing of the mind which was neither disagreeable nor frightening, Gortvai felt his circulation slow down and anguished numbness take hold of him. Throughout his life he had believed that his fate was ruled by impersonal forces, first lifting, then dropping him; now suddenly he was face to face with the personification of these forces. The secret lurking in the pink portfolio was not the one which Gortvai so often thought about on starry August nights when, alone, he looked up at the sparkling firmament from the shore of the darkening Lake Balaton. If Gortvai had found himself face to face with that, he would have met it bravely and accepted the judgment, the forgiveness and the punishment, the acquittal and the condemnation. But in the pink folder, instead of the secret, a prearranged mysteriousness was waiting and evil cruelly lurked behind the grin of good will. This was unbearable.

He was terribly afraid.

His common sense told him that uncertainty would dissolve, after he opened the pink portfolio, in the potentialities of knowledge. But his instinct, stretching its feelers from a world beyond the senses, was already fumbling for the incomparably greater danger in certitude. Never before had he been in a situation where certainty and uncertainty were equally horrifying, where knowledge of the sentence was equivalent to not knowing it, where the fear of death became identical with the fear of living. He trembled.

Gortvai's dilated pores oozed sweat. The heat intensified. 'Lieutenant, sir,' a thin voice shouted from somewhere in the dark, 'this way, please, this way, this way.' Gortvai collapsed at the foot of a snowdrift. His forehead touched the deadly cold snow, the sweet, cold snow; he flung his dreadfully tired body all over this unmade bed, then plunged into sleep, happily. He sighed deeply.

Above his head a light went on, glimmering dully. He opened his eyes and blinked. In twenty minutes, the woman had said. Gortvai picked up the pink folder. 'Now let's see,' he said aloud, but was not aware of having spoken. 'Now let's see what this is all about, Comrade Holcz.'

On a smooth, white sheet of paper the words vibrated: *The undersigned ... the triumph of Socialism ... with full confidence in the Hungarian Workers Party ... by my own resolution ... carry out faithfully all instructions ... mention it to no one ... pledge myself of my own free will ... to report everything ... my friends and colleagues ...*

And below it one more line in parentheses: *The above text is to be copied out by hand on the enclosed paper.*

To be copied, the young man murmured while he read the text again carefully. So it is to be copied. He felt his pocket unconsciously. His fountain pen was in its place, next to the cheap pigskin wallet. The trembling left his body and he calmed down. This was the moment he had been preparing for over the years, sometimes deliberately, sometimes unconsciously, but always with that intimate, organic totality with which one prepares for death throughout life.

He put the pink portfolio on his lap and once more ran through the lines. Under the cold gleaming sheet of paper, other sheets of paper waited. Without looking at them, he knew their contents. First of all me, then Father, Mother, and finally Pixy, he thought. He was not mistaken. One on top of the other, bearing the official signature and seal, four warrants for arrest lay in the pink folder. He felt sorriest for Pixy, his younger brother, who had been married two weeks ago and was on his honeymoon. Aware of his own pity, he knew not only that he had to decide but also that he had already decided; the pity he felt for his brother was synonymous with acceptance of the proposition. His brief calm dissolved suddenly in flaring heat. It was not cowardice which made his temperature rise—that he took for granted, as the conditioned reflex of the age and of his generation—but the sudden glimpse of the limits to his own resistance, of his infinite vulnerability.

With an effort he got to his feet. The heat within him and without was equally unbearable, though oddly a strong, cold draft was spreading around his ankles, as if a thin little crack had opened at the base of the wall. The window was locked; he tried the handle again and again. He looked around desperately, but no one came to his aid; now suddenly he felt the senseless, eternal solitude of damnation. Outside, in the compact, dense night, the chestnut foliage fluttered darkly, and in the distance the lights of the villages at the foot of the mountain winked. Gortvai began to spin around the room, round and round, ceaselessly, with idiotic awkwardness. With a sudden heartbeat the lamp went out.

'You didn't have the report signed?' said the old Latin teacher, stroking his neat grey beard. 'Do you think that if you die I'll forget about the report?'

Gortvai paled. 'Couldn't you abstain this once? I'll never be late again,' he said hurriedly. 'You'll see, sir, that signature won't be necessary at all.'

'Signatures are always necessary,' said his old Latin teacher firmly. 'It is the signature that puts the seal on a sentence. Death is the sum total of signatures. I am opening the examination.'

Grandfather quashed his cigar, annoyed. 'You're quoting chapter and verse again,' he said. 'You have an old hive in place of a head.'

The teacher smiled. 'If the Ministry burns down, they'll build another instead. There will always be Ministries. Regulations have to be followed. If a bee stings the captain, it will be executed. Do you believe, sir, that one can escape execution? The Principal has made signature a rule.'

'One can come to terms with the Principal,' Grandfather said, blinking. 'I'll send him a crate of honeycomb. I have never met a principal yet who didn't like honeycomb.' He smiled triumphantly.

'This one doesn't like it,' said the Latin teacher. He turned to Gortvai. 'Please translate: *Odi profanum vulgus et...*'

'Oh,' Gortvai said, 'please sir, I cannot translate that verse. I love the masses, sir. Horace didn't love the masses. That poem has been put on the Index by the Pope. I can't very well defy the Pope.'

'The Index is hereby put on the Index,' said his teacher. 'Executioner, perform your duty.'

'Excuse me,' said a blond gentleman in a purple shirt, 'couldn't the execution be postponed for ten minutes?' He

bowed. 'Edgar Wintergarten, of the Socialist Unity Party of the German Democratic Republic. Comrade Sandor was good enough to direct me here. It's a matter of a signature on a contract ... eight wagonloads of green peas ... I was instructed by the Obersturmbannführer ...'

'You are not going to sign anything,' Grandfather said to Gortvai. 'The people demand that you sign nothing.'

'Anyone wearing a purple shirt nowadays works for the Pope,' said the old Latin teacher. 'Now, who shall be executed first?'

'Thank you,' said Edgar Wintergarten, 'thank you, *Volks-genosse*. I always bow before the veterans of the labor movement. Even when I used to have them burned at Buchenwald.'

'Show me your membership card, Comrade Wintergarten,' said Gortvai. 'Let me sign it.'

'Which one?' Edgar Wintergarten asked. 'The red one or the brown?'

'What's the difference?' Grandfather asked. 'You aren't going to sign either.'

Edgar Wintergarten smiled tolerantly. 'It is obvious you have never been a member of the illegal party, or you would know ... Green peas are the German people's favorite food. Heinrich Heine wrote about it. Pity we burned his books. There isn't any difference. Parties exist so that we should join them. And concerning the contract, in my humble opinion ...'

'Who wants these green peas?' Grandfather asked impatiently.

'Rezi,' Gortvai said quickly. 'It's all her fault. What shall I do, Grandfather? My eyes have frozen.'

'You are not going to sign anything,' Grandfather said severely. 'Understand?'

'If you sign, the Trieste express will be derailed,' Alajos Sandor said. 'Think it over.'

'The German people are starving,' Endre Zibolen said. 'Sign it before the peas dry out.'

'It must not be signed,' Grandfather said.

'It must be signed,' Mrs. Mikecz said.

'Unfortunately,' said Edgar Wintergarten in the bright-purple shirt sadly, 'unfortunately, ladies and gentlemen, there never was a choice one way or the other.' And he bowed.

On Gortvai's left sat the short, clean-shaven young man; on his right an unknown person, whose head kept falling to his chest. Day was breaking. The car moved down the hillside almost noiselessly. Gortvai was cold all over. Relationships

had dissolved in time, time in space, space in the infinity, infinity in the void. Only phenomena registered. The slope. The trees. The bird twittering. The hum of the motor. Now and then, when one of the neighbors leaned against him as the car turned, his cold body felt the warmth of the live world.

The car stopped. Gortvai got out and the door closed behind him. He started across the bridge. A silvery vapor floated above the water. The sun came out, a light breeze sprang up. Across the bridge, he turned right. Olive-green light sparkled behind him with irrepressible cheerfulness.

London

January 1959 – July 1962

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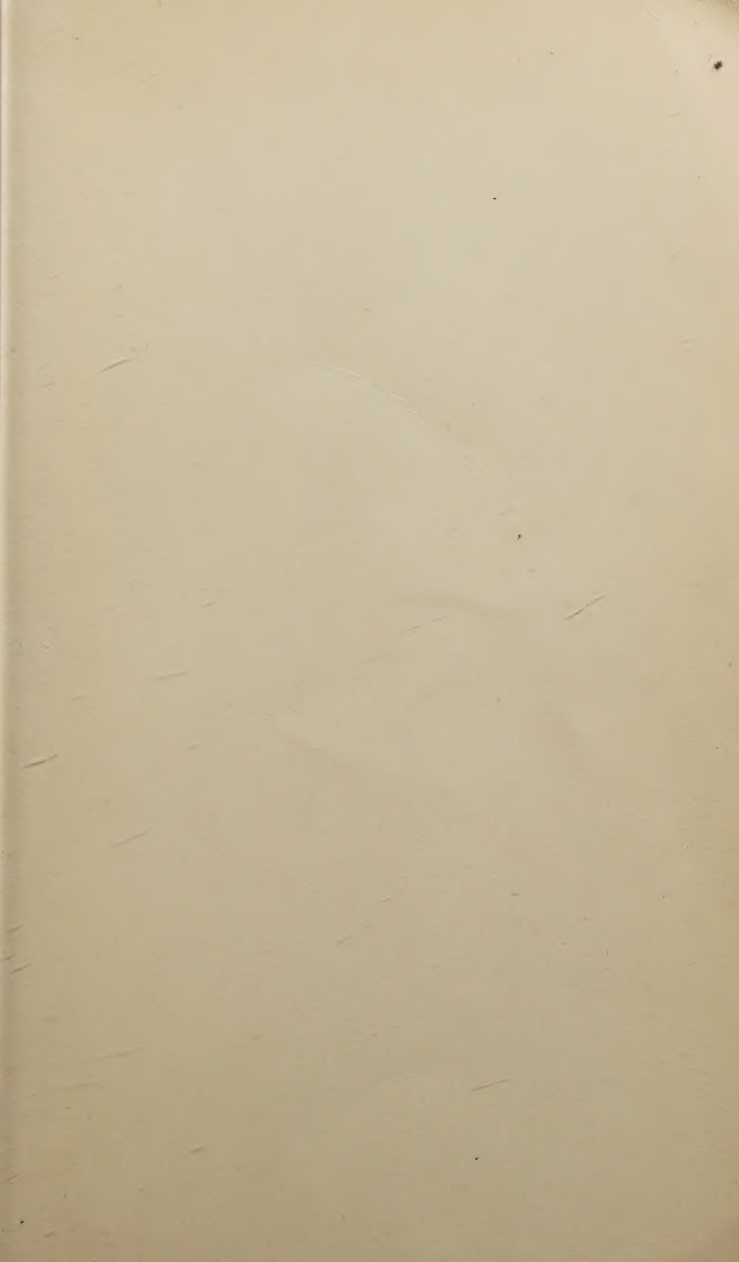
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